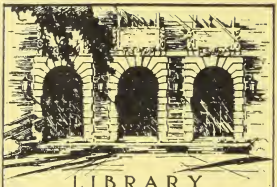

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MASOLLAM

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MASOLLAM;

A PROBLEM OF THE PERIOD.

A NOVEL

BY

LAURENCE OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF 'PICCADILLY,' 'ALTIORA PETO,' ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

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PART I.

MASOLLAM:

A PROBLEM OF THE PERIOD.

CHAPTER I.

THE LADIES' GALLERY OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

THE ladies' gallery of the House of Commons was more than usually crowded; it was the third night of an adjourned debate, to be followed by a division pregnant with fate to the Government, and honourable members had been balloting and intriguing for the admission of their female belongings, with an assiduity which was some indication of the pressure from without or within, as the case might be, to which they had been subjected. There were wives, and friends of wives, of

various Cabinet Ministers; there were two or three fair creatures so tenderly interested in certain honourable members, that they thought it better to be squeezed into that dingy recess, and look down on the crowns of the hats of those sapient legislators from a distance, than not to see anything of them at all; and there were others, very insufficiently chaperoned, because the members interested in them had "most unfortunately" been quite unable to secure the requisite number of seats. There were old ladies from the country, who had been balloted for in due course, because they were the wives of constituents, and who thus came in accidentally for a good thing in the way of a debate which they altogether failed to appreciate; and there was one, the loveliest of them all—if there had only been light enough to see her—who came from nobody knew where, and who, as time went on, and no gentleman appeared to disturb her absorbed and intense contemplation of what was going on beneath, gradually excited the curiosity of her eager companions in a very marked degree. Attention had been first called to her, partly by her having se-

cured the best seat, to the exclusion of certain ladies, each of whom thought the political position of her husband gave her a right to it; partly by the size and lustre of two diamonds in her ears, and the richness and perfect taste of her costume; and lastly, by the extraordinary depth and brilliancy of her large eyes, as she turned them for an instant on some new-comer, revealing, as she did so, a face so beautiful that it was evident she must be a stranger, or with such advantages she could not have failed to take society by storm, whoever she might be.

"I am positive they are paste, my dear," whispered old Lady Hornsey to Mrs Vere Middlehurst, with her gaze fixed on the tiny ears of the fair unknown; "it is quite impossible that they can be real. Why, there are not half-a-dozen women in London who have two solitaires of that water."

"No, they are real," returned her friend. "I am never mistaken about diamonds, even in such an uncertain light as this. She is a foreigner, that is evident—probably a Russian princess. If she is, Charles is sure to know about her. He will come up as soon as he has

spoken : he told me he should wait and answer Mr Spintail, who is speaking now. How prosy he is, and yet how eagerly she appears to listen, as if she could possibly understand him, or his feeble jokes ! It is no wonder, I am sure, that the Conservatives have lost the confidence of the country, if that is the kind of oratory they are obliged to listen to, though Charles tells me the Government is certain to be beaten."

"They are sure of a majority of nine, on the contrary : I have it from the very best authority. Meantime Spintail will most likely drawl on for an age, and I shall be half dead with impatience. Can't you lean forward and whisper to Gertrude Clareville to tell her daughter Edith, who is sitting next the woman, to draw her into conversation."

"I am afraid I could not do it without her hearing."

"Oh, nonsense ! what does that matter? Let us change places, if you don't mind the smell of smoky chimneys : I am sure this fat woman in front of me comes from the Black Country,"— and squeezing past her less enterprising neighbour, Lady Hornsey bent forward, and made her request to a lady sitting on the front

bench in a whisper which she nevertheless intended and believed to be inaudible.

But the ears with the diamonds seemed gifted with an almost supernatural power of hearing; for although at the moment the attention of their owner appeared to be riveted upon Mr Spintail, she drew gently back, and turning her large soft eyes upon her neighbour, said in French, but without lowering her voice—

"It will give me great pleasure to talk to you, if your mamma will allow you, and if you speak French. I understand a little English, but I speak it so badly, I am afraid; and I have so many questions to ask, for I am quite a stranger, and this interests me so much."

Edith Clareville, who had not overheard Lady Hornsey's stage aside, coloured with surprise and embarrassment at this unexpected address, and turned to her mother to hide her momentary confusion, while poor Lady Clareville felt as guilty as Lady Hornsey should have done, had that veteran campaigner been capable of feeling guilty under any circumstances.

"My daughter will, I am sure, be delighted

to give you every information in her power," said Lady Clareville, speaking across Edith ; but just at this moment she was interrupted by a commotion produced by some arrivals, under the escort of two members, one of whom was her son, and the other his most intimate friend, who, after seating the ladies who had been confided to them, edged themselves as close as possible to Lady Clareville and her daughter. They had scarcely done so when an appalling uproar arose from the body of the House.

"Oh, look! listen!" exclaimed Edith's neighbour, who only seemed too glad to take advantage of the hint which Lady Hornsey's whisper had afforded her to enter into conversation. "What a noise they all make! and why are they all crying Awdrawdr—Awdrawdr? what does that mean, Awdrawdr? and now they all go into fits of laughter, and one gentleman takes the tail of the coat of a gentleman who is standing up and pulls him."

"I can't imagine what is going on," said Edith. "Regy, please explain what is happening. Everybody seems screaming madly at an unfortunate man who is staring wildly

about him in the middle of the floor, apparently unconscious that he is the cause of the uproar, and several people have made clutches at his coat; why, even the Prime Minister is laughing;—there now, he has been pulled down into a seat close to the table."

"It is only a new member, ignorant of the rules of the House, passing between Spintail and the Speaker," replied her brother, laughing. "See how wretchedly abashed the poor victim looks, in his temporary refuge on the front Opposition bench, squeezed in between a lot of ex-Ministers, and how the House is enjoying his confusion, which is only exceeded by that of Spintail, who has been interrupted in the middle of his peroration, and can't pick it up again."

"And what do they all mean by calling Ya, ya, ya, ya, ya, ya?" asked the unknown, turning to Reginald Clareville, as Mr Spintail, after a final oratorical effort, resumed his seat amid the cheers of his party. Clareville was so dazzled by the brilliancy of the gaze which accompanied this question, and so melted by a tenderness that did not seem altogether appropriate to it, that to his intense mortifica-

tion he felt himself colouring slightly beneath it, as he explained that this was the British parliamentary method of expressing approbation. He soon became more than reconciled to the thirst for information which seemed to possess the fair stranger, as he pointed out the more distinguished characters below, accompanying his remarks by a running commentary, couched in a strain of cynicism which exhibited singular impartiality, coming from one of the most rising among the younger politicians of the day. As he perceived the interest he excited in his listener, he felt himself warming to his subject, the more especially as in the observations with which she occasionally interrupted him, she displayed an unusually quick faculty of apprehension, and an intelligence which seemed as rare as her beauty. He was engaged in a subtle metaphysical analysis of the moral and intellectual characteristics of the Prime Minister, when that statesman arose and held the House for an hour under the spell of his eloquence. The ringing cheers with which his last words were greeted were followed by the division bell, and Clareville and his friend, who had in the

meantime been devoting himself to Miss Clareville, were summoned to perform the most important of their legislative functions.

"I must run away and vote now," he said, hurriedly, "but I shall be back in a quarter of an hour to take my mother and sister to the carriage. There will be nothing more of interest to-night after the division;" and then after a pause, which he dared not prolong, as he thought of the sand running through the minute-glass, and the danger of being shut out in the lobby, he stammered, "I suppose somebody is coming for you?"

"You are in a hurry now,—I will tell you when you come back," she said, softly; and Clareville rushed after his friend, whom he only overtook as he was entering the House.

Meantime Lady Hornsey had taken advantage of the momentary stir in the ladies' gallery to get immediately behind the diamonds which had so keenly excited her interest.

"Have you ever been in the House of Commons before?" she inquired, in by no means the purest French, leaning forward till her lips were in close proximity to those glit-

tering jewels. They seemed to flash if possible more brightly, but their wearer had lapsed into sudden taciturnity.

"It is a curious scene, is it not?" proceeded her ladyship, nothing abashed, and in a louder tone, as the members came trooping in; and the murmur which greeted them as the tellers of the Opposition were observed to be on the right, as they advanced to the table, swelled to a sudden roar when the numbers were announced. Then followed the wildest demonstrations of delight: honourable members shrieked, and went so far as to stand on their seats and to fling their hats in the air; for it was such a crushing defeat on a cardinal point of policy, that the Government, which had already sustained more than one of minor importance, was now left no alternative. It was no wonder that the stranger was too much interested to attend to Lady Hornsey, but peered intently through the glass which rendered her invisible to the eyes of Reginald Clareville, at that moment gazing up at the latticed barrier.

"Good heavens! My dear, the Government is beaten, and will have to go out," ejaculated

Lady Hornsey, applying this familiar epithet in her agitation to whoever might chance to think herself included.

"I think Lady Hornsey is speaking to you," said Edith, not without a touch of malice, turning to her impassible neighbour.

"*Oh, pardon, mille fois pardon!*" exclaimed the latter, looking round straight into Lady Hornsey's face, and scanning it with great deliberation. "I was just thinking how much these gentlemen resemble a set of howling dervishes; and how like we are, cooped up here behind this lattice screen, to a lot of Turkish ladies in a harem." She uttered the words "derveesh" and "hareem" with the marked pronunciation which belongs to them in Eastern tongues, and again became absorbed in the scene below, while Lady Hornsey, leaning back to Mrs Vere Middlehurst, whispered—

"I feel certain, my dear, that she has some black paint round her eyes,"—and her ladyship rose to leave, lingering, however, at the doorway, that she might intercept Clareville on his return.

"Oh, Mr Clareville," she said, when that

gentleman appeared, "this defeat of the Government is really quite too terrible. You will do me such a favour if you will find out who the beautiful stranger is you have been talking to. Mrs Vere Middlehurst has asked her husband, and he does not know. If she is the least respectable, I want her to come to me on Thursday night: I am sure she would create a sensation. I don't think I ever saw anything so lovely. I suppose, if she has a husband, I shall be obliged to have him too: but foreigners are always presentable. Do find out all about her, and come and lunch with me to-morrow and tell me who she is, and what the Government mean to do about it all,"—and Lady Hornsey waddled off on the arm of Mr Vere Middlehurst, with a mind agitated in equal proportions by her feminine curiosity and her political proclivities.

"Sebastian," said Clareville to his friend, who had returned with him to the gallery, "please look after my mother and sister while I take care of the unprotected female next to Edith, if, as I suspect, she stands in need of protection;" and as he spoke he looked up and encountered a wistful confiding gaze, which

left no doubt on his mind that his suspicions would turn out correct.

"I will follow you," he added to his mother and sister, who had now joined him, and were putting on their wraps. "Hartwright will see you to the carriage."

Meantime the gallery was emptying, but the stranger, who was rapidly becoming invested with a mysterious interest in Clareville's eyes, remained seated.

"Do you expect somebody, or are you still too much interested in the processes of British legislation to tear yourself away?" he asked, as he seated himself comfortably by her side.

"I am not expecting anybody, and I am more interested, perhaps, in some of the legislators than in the legislation," she replied, with a smile. "Though I confess that my object in coming here to-night was chiefly to be present at a crisis in the political fortunes of this country, which cannot fail to exercise a momentous influence not merely upon its own future destiny, but which must seriously affect that of other nations. Those boisterous politicians with the *cœur léger* whom I saw throwing their hats into the air just now,

little suspect the weighty consequences which hang upon their vote. They are like school-boys who have been playing a game, and who cheer because their side has won. Have they ever thought what their side winning means for the countless millions whose fate has been decided by that victory? *Des marionnettes!* How should they know, those twenty-seven that formed the majority, what effect their vote is destined to have on the fortunes of the race? But I tell you,"—and she turned with sparkling eye and quivering nostril on Clareville, — "that among the wanderers of the deserts, and dwellers in distant palm-groves, its action will be felt, no less than among those who claim the peat-bogs of Ireland, or the lion's share of their industry in your own country. Ah, I see more," she said, lowering her voice, and speaking very slowly. "It means war, and I see those who have taken part in that vote to whom this night will be fatal."

Clareville meanwhile had listened to this strange exordium, with its assumption of prophetic inspiration, with a mingled feeling of admiration, wonder, and amusement. Nor

could he altogether deny that, however much she might be mistaken as to the far-reaching consequences of the division in which he had taken part, the levity which reduced it to a mere party triumph was calculated to astonish a stranger, who would naturally consider a change in the Government, and therefore in the foreign policy of so great a country as England, to be a matter of extreme gravity: but being of a somewhat sceptical and cynical temperament, he failed altogether to be impressed by what he irreverently termed "the fortune-telling business" at the end.

"I quite admit the justice of your criticism," he said, "as to a certain incongruity between the solemnity of the issue at stake and the somewhat boyish demonstrations we make over it. We pick up the habit at our public schools, and are unable to shake it off. You have just seen here a cricket-match at Lord's, or a university boat-race, or a Derby day, carried into politics. We have no imagination, and our methods are always more or less the same. Thus you saw the episode of the new member. We always look out for that. It is like the dog that runs down the

race-course. Then after the division is taken, we cheer the winner,—that is the end of the race; but this time I am afraid it has been witnessed by a Cassandra: your terrible predictions have caused me the greatest consternation."

"I predicted no misfortunes to your country. I simply say it is a crisis in her fate from which, for all I know, she may come out unscathed; and in the fate of others, both of nations and of individuals, from which they will not: but I did not ask you to attach any importance to it. The day will come when you will remember what I have said."

"You have said enough, at all events, to excite my curiosity, and to give me food for reflection. I so far agree with you, that I think the position of foreign affairs abroad, and the relation of England towards them, in the highest degree critical; and a reversal of policy by a new Government must produce important changes, and possibly bring about new and serious complications. I should like to know something more definite: for instance, can you tell me to whom this night will prove fatal, and how or when?—and might I

further venture to ask in which of the legislators you are especially interested?"

"It would be useless to answer your first question, for you do not know those of whom I am thinking; but the legislators in whom I am especially interested"—and she paused as the words seemed forced from her lips by an effort, either real or affected—"are Mr Sebastian Hartwright and Mr Reginald Clareville. I would rather you had not asked me the question, but I dare not refuse to answer."

"She need not have led up to it in that case," thought Clareville; and he became aware of a curious sensation of puzzled fascination creeping over him. This was the more remarkable as he prided himself on his imperviousness to attack from the whole feminine armoury. As the only son of Lord Clareville, he was an eligible *parti*, putting aside his good looks and political prospects; but without being a misogynist, he had obtained a reputation for impenetrability, which was the exasperation and despair of maidens and their mothers, to say nothing of the young married women. Now he was

already becoming conscious that this unknown stranger was throwing a spell over him which he was at a loss to describe. This was the more annoying because she seemed aware of her power, and to be doing it deliberately. She was certainly not a flirt in the ordinary acceptation of the term. Snakes who fascinate birds can scarcely be said to be flirting with them. Naturalists have not yet pushed scientific analysis to the point of being able to describe for us the sensation of the birds, nor can any one venture to assert that their emotions may not be of a mixed character —a sort of pleasurable alarm, in fact. Much less are they able to define the nature of the force which is projected from the visual organ of the reptile, and which possesses the singular faculty of dominating the volition of the victim : it is a region of speculation which, while it is impossible for them to deny that it exists, they shrink from entering upon— an aggravating region, because it eludes the power of a microscope or the action of a blowpipe, and is nevertheless an active and persistent force in nature, which is pronounced to be unknowable to anybody because it has

proved unknowable to them. It was so distinctly "feelable" by Clareville, that he made a vigorous effort of will to resist the attraction of which he was becoming conscious, the more so as the languor which seemed stealing over his faculties was calculated to predispose them to a certain credulity. "An adventuress with sham diamonds, who supposes that I am as easy to mystify as to flatter," he thought, as he said with an almost imperceptible sneer, and with not quite so much respect thrown into his tone as he had hitherto used—

"I suppose my sister Edith pointed us out to you, and told you our names. I am sure my friend Hartwright would feel as highly flattered as I do by the interest you are kind enough to express in us both, even though it must be of somewhat sudden growth."

"Pardon me," she replied, not in the least disconcerted by his change of manner; "it has existed for many years. Nor is there any reason why either you or he should be flattered by it. There are often reasons why we should feel an interest in persons which need not always be complimentary to them—quite the reverse." And Clareville thought, as she said

this in a soft voice, that he detected a shade of sadness beneath the flash of those lovely eyes. "You asked me who were the members of Parliament that I felt especially interested in, and I told you—*voilà tout!* At the same time, I added that I would much rather not have done so. Your sister did not tell me your names," she added after a pause, as she rose from her seat and drew a light *bournous* of a very rich oriental material over her shoulders.

"I must admit," said Clareville, a little taken aback by this sudden change of front, and with a somewhat embarrassed laugh, "that I was unduly conceited in attaching any complimentary sense to the interest you expressed in us—in me, at all events. You must let me make reparation for my vanity by putting you into your carriage. And I think that you, in your turn, owe me something for having piqued my curiosity. If you cannot stay and gratify it now, may I venture to hope that you will allow me to call upon you?"

"I shall be very happy to see you at my hotel whenever you like to call," she replied, as she accepted the proffered arm.

"As I do not possess, like you, the sense of

divining people's names, permit me to inquire whose carriage I am to ask for," said Clareville, as they reached the yard, relapsing again into resentment at the mystification of which he felt he was being made the victim.

"Ask for Mr Cottrell's carriage, please;" and a policeman brought up at Clareville's request a neat private brougham.

"May I call to-morrow, and if so, at what hour, and where?" asked Clareville, half inclined to beg for a seat by her side, as he handed her into the carriage.

"At three o'clock to-morrow, at the Grand Hotel, if that will suit you. You can bring your friend Mr Hartwright with you, if you like. See, here is my card, so that you cannot make a mistake." And she added in a decided tone, as if to check the request upon his lips, "Good night,—I am much obliged for your kindness; please tell the coachman to drive home." And Clareville pressed the tips of the fingers that were extended to him, and shouted "Home," as with uncovered head and profound salutation he watched the carriage dash off, and saw the diamonds gleam for a moment in the gaslight.

"Amina Masollam," he muttered to himself, glancing at the card he still held in his hand; "what an uncouth name! There is nothing on her card about the Grand Hotel to prove whether she is married or single, nor was there on her finger either, now that I come to think of it. Who is Cottrell? Is there a Mr Masollam, I wonder; and if there is, what country has the honour of claiming him as a native? Perhaps he is 'a wanderer of the desert, or a dweller in some distant palm-grove.' It will be only fair to Hartwright to tell him what an interest he has excited in the breast of a lovely and inspired prophetess, and take him with me—I shall be sure to find him at the club." And thither Clareville wended his way; and the two young men sat up till a late hour discussing the mysterious *incognita* whom they were to visit on the following day, and, what was far more important, the effect of the division upon their own political prospects and that of their party.

At three o'clock next day the two friends repaired to the Grand Hotel, and asked for Madame Masollam. The porter informed them that no such person had been staying at the

hotel, but that a lady had left a note that morning, saying that it was to be handed to a gentleman who would call to inquire for her at three o'clock that afternoon. It contained only these lines :—

"I am sorry not to be able to keep my appointment. Tell your friend we shall meet before long. A. M."

"Not flattering, so far as I am concerned," said Clareville, with a laugh. "It is clear which of us inspires the most interest."

"If she had been an impostor with designs upon us, in the first place she would have chosen you as more valuable prey than myself; and in the second, she would not have disappeared when her efforts so far had been crowned with success," returned his friend.

"I don't know about our respective values as objects of prey," replied Clareville; "but of the two I suspect that, with your mystical tendency, impulsive temperament, and love of adventure, you would be far more easily captured than I should, my dear Sebastian. Perhaps that is why she has decided that you are

to have the first chance. However, we have more serious matters to attend to than this lovely and mysterious witch, whatever her designs may be;" and the two young members crossed the street into Palace Yard, on their way to the House, under the escort of a policeman especially told off to protect the valuable lives of timid legislators on foot from their more impetuous colleagues in hansom cabs.

CHAPTER II.

THE MASOLLAMS.

At the very moment that the two friends were entering the House of Commons, a lady and two gentlemen were standing on the platform at the door of a first-class carriage of a train which was on the point of taking its departure from the terminus of the Great Midland Railway.

"I trust, Mr Masollam," said the younger of the two men, "that you are satisfied with the manner in which I have discharged my trust towards your daughter? I assure you it required all the influence I possess to obtain the seat for her in the ladies' gallery which she seemed so much to desire. I only regret that my capacities for service are not always equal to my inclinations; but I beg of you

not on that account to hesitate to command them. I am aware that in saying even thus much, I am in a manner guilty of presumption. You, who see so far into the motives of men, require no verbal assurances from me to enable you to appreciate mine."

"You speak wisely, my friend," replied the person thus addressed. "I judge no man by his professions of service, nor by any analysis he may furnish to me of his motives. I will go farther, and say that a man's acts are but an uncertain guide. I am, however, well satisfied with yours so far, and it is possible that ere long occasion may arise when your professions will be tested to the full extent of your desires. You are but a beginner, you know, and beginners are apt to be a little over-confident. But here is the guard coming to shut us out if we linger longer. *Au revoir*, my son. You know my address—to the care of Carabet at Tongsley. Write to me if you have any information on the points in regard to which you have my instructions."

Helping the lady into the carriage, the speaker followed her with an activity beyond his years ; while she, leaning out of the window,

waved an adieu to the gentleman left standing on the platform, who kissed his hand in reply.

"It was a pity that Cottrell did not employ some of that small capacity to which he has just made allusion, to the extent of securing us a carriage to ourselves," remarked Mr Masollam, in a tongue not certainly understood by a gentleman and two ladies who were its previous occupants, while he busied himself stowing away sundry rugs and packages in the rack overhead.

"It was not his fault. Nothing could have been kinder, or more zealous or efficient, than he has been. Besides, that need not prevent us from talking secrets," returned the lady, as she turned the flashing eyes and diamonds, which had already captivated Reginald Clareville and Lady Hornsey by their rival brilliancy, upon her travelling companions. "You don't suppose any of them understand Armenian?" She slightly raised her voice, and uttered the last sentence very slowly and distinctly, as she watched its effect upon the other passengers. Apparently satisfied that she might continue her conversation in that language without danger of being understood,

she continued, "What a pity it was that you prevented me from keeping my appointment!"

"It was unavoidable," answered her companion. "Read that,"—and he handed her a telegram to the following effect: "The H.'s will probably leave England day after to-morrow. Don't delay.—C." "Of course, then, I had nothing for it but to leave Paris as quickly as I could, and telegraph to you to meet me here. I only just caught the train as it was—thanks to the tidal boat."

"May I see our letter of introduction to them?" she asked.

He took a letter from a somewhat bulky pocket-book, and gave it to her. This was what she read:—

"My dear Hartwright,—This will be handed to you by a very old friend of mine, Mr Masollam, who is now on a visit to England with his daughter. I first made his aquaintance in the East some thirty years ago; since then I have had occasion more than once to test his extraordinary powers. Do not allow any narrow prejudice to prevent you from availing yourself of his services, should he offer them: I consider him the most

remarkably gifted man that I have ever met, and he is as good as he is gifted. Let me add that his daughter is as beautiful as she is good.—Yours ever, SANTALBA."

"He does not know as much about your gifts as I do, my dear, or he would not have ended with such an equivocal compliment. However, you will probably soon have an opportunity of exercising them," remarked the old gentleman, as he slowly folded up the letter and put it back in his pocket-book. There was a remarkable alternation of vivacity and deliberation about the movements of Mr Masollam. His voice seemed pitched in two different keys, the effect of which was, when he changed them, to make one seem a distant echo of the other—a species of ventriloquistic phenomenon which was calculated to impart a sudden and not altogether pleasant shock to the nerves of the listeners. When he talked with what I may term his "near" voice, he was generally rapid and vivacious; when he exchanged it for his "far-off" one, he was solemn and impressive. His hair, which had once been raven black, was now streaked with grey, but it was still thick, and fell in a

massive wave over his ears, and nearly to his shoulders, giving him something of a leonine aspect. His brow was overhanging and bushy, and his eyes were like revolving lights in two dark caverns, so fitfully did they seem to emit flashes, and then lose all expression. Like his voice, they too had a near and a far-off expression, which could be adjusted to the required focus like a telescope, growing smaller and smaller as though in an effort to project the sight beyond the limits of natural vision. At such times they would be so entirely devoid of all appreciation of outward objects, as to produce almost the impression of blindness, when suddenly the focus would change, the pupil expand, and rays flash from them like lightning from a thunder-cloud, giving an unexpected and extraordinary brilliancy to a face which seemed promptly to respond to the summons. The general cast of countenance, the upper part of which, were it not for the depth of the eye-sockets, would have been strikingly handsome, was decidedly Semitic; and in repose the general effect was almost statuesque in its calm fixedness. The mouth was partially concealed by a heavy moustache

and long iron-grey beard; but the transition from repose to animation revealed an extraordinary flexibility in those muscles which had a moment before appeared so rigid, and the whole character of the countenance was altered as suddenly as the expression of the eye. It would perhaps be prying too much into the secrets of nature, or, at all events, into the secrets of Mr Masollam's nature, to inquire whether this lightening and darkening of the countenance was voluntary or not. In a lesser degree, it is a common phenomenon with us all: the effect of one class of emotions is, vulgarly speaking, to make a man look black, and of another to make him look bright. The peculiarity of Mr Masollam was that he could look so much blacker and brighter than most people, and make the change of expression with such extraordinary rapidity and intensity, that it seemed a sort of facial legerdemain, and suggested the suspicion that it might be an acquired faculty. There was, moreover, another change which he apparently had the power of working on his countenance, which affects other people involuntarily, and which generally, especially

in the case of the fair sex, does so very much against their will. For instance, we say of a lady that she is *journalière*, by which we mean that on some days she looks much older than on others. Now Mr Masollam had the faculty of looking very much older one hour than he did the next. There were moments when a careful study of his wrinkles, and of his dull, faded-looking eyes, would lead you to put him down at eighty if he was a day; and there were others when his flashing glance, expanding nostril, broad smooth brow, and mobile mouth, would make a rejuvenating combination, that would for a moment convince you that you had been at least five-and-twenty years out in your first estimate. When he was erect, he stood about six feet in his stockings, but his attitudes varied with his moods, and he often drooped suddenly and tottered along with bowed shoulders and unsteady gait. These rapid contrasts were calculated to arrest the attention of the most casual observer, and to produce a sensation which was not altogether pleasant when first one made his acquaintance. It was not exactly mis-

trust,—for both manners were perfectly frank and natural,—so much as perplexity. He seemed to be two opposite characters rolled into one, and to be presenting undesigningly a curious moral and physiological problem for solution, which had a disagreeable sort of attractiveness about it, for you almost immediately felt it to be insoluble, and yet it would not let you rest. He might be the best or the worst of men. Perhaps his moral nature presented the same violent contrasts that were observable in his physical aspect, and that he was alternately first one and then the other. Either he was a freak of nature, a sort of *lusus naturæ* so far as the psychical and emotional part of him was concerned, or he had acquired a wonderful artificial mastery over those forces which transmit the expression of feeling to feature, and could produce transformations which so far transcend the trick of the comedian, that they involved no forced or unnatural muscular distortion, but appeared simply to depend upon the spontaneous but subtle play of some internal light and shade, which seemed to transfuse his whole being, and force their influence

upon the outer surfaces of his organism. He was like a landscape over which dark thunder-clouds are constantly rolling, and obscuring the bright sunlight, which, when it did burst forth, made the very features that a moment before were gloomy and almost repellent, bright and attractive. The effect of this peculiarity upon sensitive natures with whom he was brought into contact, was to produce in them corresponding alternations of sympathy and antipathy. It was as though he was alternately presenting to them the positive and negative poles of his being. They were like tin geese with iron bills in a basin of water, now sailing gracefully towards their magnetic acquaintance, now turning their backs upon him, and as gracefully sailing away.

"So you saw both the young men," said Mr Masollam to his daughter, after a cloudy pause. "Tell me about them." And the sun came out.

"I scarcely saw anything of young Hartwright," she replied; "that is why I was so disappointed at missing him to-day. He seemed quite absorbed by Miss Clareville, Reginald Clareville's sister. So, *faute de mieux*, I de-

voted myself to Reginald, and I must say I rather like him. He is decidedly clever and original."

Two bright rays flashed from the caverns under the bushy brows of the old man as he listened to this, and then went suddenly out, and he sank back into his corner in silence.

"What did you leave mother to do in Paris?" asked his daughter, after another long pause, during which they had both seemed buried in their own thoughts.

"She is taking care of Santalba—he is not well. It was better so: three of us would have been too much of an intrusion on the hospitality of this cold-blooded Englishman."

"Why, do you expect to stay with him? I thought we were going to Carabet's."

"Under no circumstances should we do that. I have telegraphed to Carabet to take rooms for us at the best hotel, and to meet us at the station. In the first place, I doubt whether he has room for us; and in the second, it would not be expedient under the circumstances for us to be the guests of a man who keeps an old curiosity shop. Besides, there are other reasons." A very dark cloud flitted

across the landscape as he uttered this last sentence, but it had passed away before he added, "I do not think it probable, after Mr Hartwright receives our letter of introduction, that he will allow us to remain in the hotel —at least, if he decides to postpone his departure ; but it does not much matter whether he does or not."

The large town for which our travellers were bound lay in the centre of an important mining district in one of the northern counties of England, and it was nearly midnight before they reached it. On the platform they were met by a dapper little man, who received Mr Masollam with a deference and respect almost amounting to servility, and who manifested in his intercourse with that personage a nervousness and timidity that seemed foreign to his real nature, to judge from the somewhat peremptory vivacity with which he ordered about porters and cabmen in a language which was meant to be English, but which a strong foreign accent rendered almost unintelligible to them.

"How is Sada?" asked Mr Masollam in the same language in which he had been convers-

ing with his daughter, and in his deepest and darkest tones, after they were all three seated in the cab. There was too little light from the flickering gas-lamps for Carabet to see the change on the face which corresponded to the voice, but his own trembled as he replied—

"She is as she always is—no better, no worse. I watch her carefully, O sage."

I can give no better translation of the final epithet used than this, though it implied more, and signified authority combined with wisdom.

"When do the Hartwrights leave?" was Mr Masollam's next question.

"His butler, who, ever since I have been established in this town, has been my most intimate friend,"—and Carabet ventured on a little laugh, which did not reach the dimensions of an audible chuckle before it was repressed from an instinctive feeling that it would not be approved,—"his butler, Mr Sharp, told me yesterday that instead of going to-morrow evening, as they intended when I sent you my telegram, they would not leave till the following morning."

Mr Masollam drew a card from his pocket, and after inquiring the name of the hotel at

which they were to stay, ordered the cab to stop, while he carefully wrote it in the corner.

"Does Mr Hartwright live in the town?" he inquired.

"No, O master," answered Carabet; "in a mansion on its outskirts, about two miles out. It is a very handsome house; indeed they say he lives much above his means."

"To-morrow morning," said Masollam, in his measured, reproving voice, "I shall have a great many questions to ask you: you need not trouble me with your information now,—keep it till then, and I hope it will prove to be sufficient. You have been spending a good deal of money, my son; and as some months have elapsed since you have sent any to me, I presume you have not made any."

"Believe me, I never forget, O my master, that my knowledge or information, whatever it may be worth, and my time, and my money, nay, my very life itself, is at your disposal, to do with as you will."

He was continuing in his profession of faith when he was interrupted by the cab drawing up to the door of the hotel.

"Here," said Masollam before he got out,

handing the letter of introduction and card to his follower, "is a letter of introduction and my card, which I wish you personally to convey to your friend Mr Sharp, as early as may be in the morning, and tell him, when he gives it to Mr Hartwright, that the messenger is waiting for an answer: and stay," he added, as, after a profound salute, Carabet was about to take his departure,—"does Sada know that you expected me?"

"She knows nothing. I had no instructions to tell her anything, and kept silence."

"You did right—keep it still. Good night,"—and Masollam turned a face furrowed with age to the obsequious waiter, and, leaning on his daughter's arm, followed that functionary with bent frame and tottering steps to the apartments which had been provided for them.

"I am suffering to-night," he said, when he reached them, and threw himself wearily into an arm-chair. "Carabet has been under my influence now for more than twenty years, and should have more sense of what is going on under his nose. Sada is worse, much worse. I felt it the moment I touched his hand; and he, though he lives in the house, was too dense

to perceive it. There is something wrong with him too, or he must have felt it," he muttered, after passing his hand three or four times slowly over his eyes, from which all light seemed to have absolutely faded away. "We have a heavy day before us to-morrow, my child," he added, looking up at his daughter, who was standing by his chair with her hand on his shoulder. "Go to bed; you are tired now, and will need all the rest you can get for what is in store for us both. I know not what I should do, if it were not for the life I gain from your strong young frame."

"Surely, father, you will go to bed too," she said; "you who have come all the way from Paris without stopping, must be far more tired than I am."

"Physically," he replied, with a smile, "I feel no fatigue except in so far as the moral may affect the physical: my nerves are tired, child, or rather they are only the outer casing of what is tired within them—and that has not been made tired by travelling, but by the elements with which they are loaded. Go you and sleep for us both,—your repose will rest me,—while I watch."

CHAPTER III.

AN ARMENIAN CURIOSITY-DEALER.

However dense, from Mr Masollam's point of view, Carabet may have been in regard to a certain item of information which he had imparted to his sage and master, he was correct enough as to the two pieces of intelligence he had given him with reference to Mr Hartwright. The villa inhabited by that gentleman, which stood in several acres of shrubbery and ornamental grounds, and was called "The Turrets," was not without architectural merit, if, as may be gathered from the name, it had not been too ornate and pretentious; while the establishment which he kept up in it was far beyond his means—so far beyond them, that he had decided to let it and go abroad, partly to economise, and

partly in the hope of finding some scheme with which he might identify himself as a promoter or concessioner, which would furnish him with the capital necessary to meet his most pressing creditors.

He was not altogether inexperienced in such matters, for as the younger brother of Richard Hartwright—the celebrated contractor, and father of the young member to whom I have already introduced the reader—he had been interested in many most important financial enterprises, and indeed in his earlier days had been a partner in some of them; but his habits of reckless extravagance, combined with a certain moral laxity in financial matters, had decided his elder brother, who was a man of scrupulous probity and sound business capacity, to dissolve all connection with him, and to content himself with throwing a good thing from time to time in his younger brother's way. It was on the top of a *coup*, made through his brother Richard's instrumentality, that Charles Hartwright succeeded in winning the affections of a young lady possessed of considerable fortune, whom he shortly after married; and had they been

contented to live quietly, their combined resources sufficed to maintain them comfortably in a style which corresponded with their position. Mrs Charles Hartwright, unfortunately, had aspirations of a social character incompatible with economy. She wanted her husband to be in Parliament, and succeeded in making him spend far more in a contested election, in which he was defeated, than he could afford; and she made three desperate assaults on London society in three successive seasons, only to be routed shamefully on each occasion,—a circumstance the more galling, because she saw success achieved by rivals who seemed in her prejudiced eyes inferior to herself in the four great requisites for it—wealth, beauty, talent, and impudence. When to these political and social excesses were added the cares of a family of three sons and two daughters, some of whom inherited the extravagant habits of both father and mother, and had come to an age when expensive dresses for the girls, and hunting for the youths, were the indispensable adjuncts of life, it became evident to Charles Hartwright and his wife that a crash could only be averted, either by a

reduction of their establishment, which would compromise them in the eyes of such aristocratic friends as they had succeeded at a great sacrifice of self-respect in making, or by a temporary exile, during which it might be hoped that something would turn up by means of which their shattered fortunes might be repaired.

Hartwright was brooding over his prospects in his dressing-room, in an especially unamiable frame of mind, for a hitch had occurred at the last moment with the solicitor with whom he was in negotiation for the lease of his house, when his valet entered with a letter and a card, saying, as he handed them to his master—

"Mr Sharp told me to say that the messenger was waiting, in case you wanted to send an answer, sir."

Hartwright took them with the air of a man whose communications were generally of an unpleasant nature, and after glancing at the card slowly, perused the letter. Then he took up the card again, looked at it more carefully, and pondered.

"Bring me my writing-materials," he said

at length, "and tell Jane to ask her mistress to step here for a moment."

The servant disappeared, and shortly after Mrs Hartwright, in an elaborately embroidered *peignoir*, entered the room.

"Look at those,"—and her husband gave her the letter and the card.

"Well, what do you propose to do about them?" said the lady, after complying with his request.

"That is just what I sent for you to consult about: it might be worth our while to put off our departure for a few days, and see what these people are like — more particularly as I have just heard from Travers that he will not take the house for his client, who is a hunting man, unless I pay for the repairs of the stables. Santalba is a man who generally knows what he is about, and he would not write so strongly unless he had good reason for doing so. I was thinking of writing to invite this Mr Masollam and his daughter to come and dine and sleep."

"It will be very inconvenient," answered Mrs Hartwright; "half the things are packed —we are all in confusion. I have already

settled with some of the servants; besides," she added, somewhat inconsequently, after a pause, "Masollam is such a very odd name, don't you think we had better see them first? Suppose we begin by asking them to lunch, —we can always extend our invitation if we find it best to make the effort; and it will be an effort, I assure you, Charles. Men never can realise what an amount of bother rootings-up of this sort entail."

Her husband looked at her with a grim smile.

"If your amount of bother, as you call it, were put in the balance against mine, I have very little doubt which would kick the beam. However, we will not discuss that now; let it be as you say. I will invite them to luncheon, and we will be guided as to what civility we show them beyond that, by our judgment as to the use they may be turned to." From which it will appear that, whatever they might be in public, Mr and Mrs Hartwright scorned humbug in their intercourse with each other.

When, an hour later, Mr Hartwright's invitation to luncheon was handed to Masollam,

that great Asiatic mystery was in his most youthful mood: his erect frame and sparkling eyes quite startled the waiter who had helped him to his room the preceding evening. Mr Carabet had arrived early, and had been imparting information for some time, apparently of a cheering kind. He had even had the honour of breakfasting with the sage, who, after looking at his watch, turned to his daughter.

"Amina," he said, "Mr Hartwright has kindly invited us to luncheon. As we shall not need to start for more than a couple of hours, suppose we walk round with Carabet and see Sada?"

"You should have seen the astonishment of the natives," observed Carabet to his companions, as he led the way, "when I first dazzled their eyes with a glimpse of the taste and the splendour of the East. The curiosity and interest which it excited in a second-rate town like this convinces me that, with the growing taste for æsthetic decoration, a great field is open to enterprising speculators from the East, if they would try their fortunes in the largest centres of population. As it is,

I believe mine is the only establishment of the kind outside of London. And I——"

"Remember, my son, that it is only a means to an end," interrupted Masollam, "and do not let your trading instincts divert you from the higher aims which give our lives a meaning unknown to the world at large. You distract me with your commercial gabble."

As he thus spoke, they turned down the street in which Mr Carabet's shop was situated, and which seemed rather too quiet to be considered eligible as a business locality; but possibly it had other advantages which compensated for this inconvenience. The *bric-a-brac* in which he dealt was almost exclusively oriental. Besides a very fair assortment of Egyptian and Syrian antiquities, which had every appearance of being genuine, there were Persian carpets and brass-work; silks from Bagdad; filigree silver-work, *kuffiyehs* and *abâyehs*, from Damascus; Bedouin bangles, olive-wood, and mother-of-pearl ornaments from Jerusalem, and many of the cheaper articles of Eastern manufacture adapted to all classes of customers. Indeed in some respects

the collection seemed too good for the country town in which he had established himself, and implied a confidence in the artistic and æsthetic tendencies of the inhabitants which it was extremely improbable that the results would justify. That, however, was Mr Carabet's own affair. He was in the habit of assuring his customers that he had no reason to be dissatisfied with the patronage he was receiving. He depended for it, he said, not so much upon the people of the town as of the country. His reputation was spreading. People interested in such things made long railway journeys expressly to see his collection; and he had the satisfaction of knowing that while he was putting money into his pocket, he was the means of developing in the manufacturing and rural districts of England a taste for art, which could only be accomplished by persons who were willing to take the risk of forcing it upon their notice by bringing treasures of this description to their very doors. Indeed he carried his zeal for the general good in these matters so far, as to exhibit specimens of all the different descriptions of fraudulent imitations which are manu-

factured to order, and are current in the East, for the benefit of the unwary traveller; and he even derived a small income by giving private lessons on the subject. Mr Carabet, who had an artless and unsophisticated mind, was wont to confess to the customers with whom he dealt the most largely, and from whom he obtained the highest prices, that he had scruples of conscience lest his pupils, instead of being amateurs and tourists, who came to him to learn how to buy the true, were themselves manufacturers of base imitations, who came to learn by minute examination of the originals how to make the false. The frankness with which Mr Carabet asked the advice of high-minded customers on this knotty point, his great learning as a numismatist, and the anxiety he showed to adjust his prices to the intrinsic value of the articles he sold, made it impossible for any one to suspect that he was himself one of the most skilful fabricators of forgeries living. But it was none the less a proud boast of Mr Carabet's, and a true one, that nobody who came to buy genuine antiques from him had ever purchased a forgery, or even paid a higher

price than the article was worth. In propounding his moral difficulties to his customers, however, and explaining to them the nature of the frauds perpetrated by less scrupulous dealers than himself, it never occurred to him to ask whether they considered it dishonest for a man to make forgeries and sell them confidentially as such, to men who came to buy them. As he was a quick and remarkably intelligent man, with a considerable charm of manner, which was rather enhanced than otherwise in the eyes of the natives by his eager efforts to master their language—in which, during nearly a year's residence, he had made tolerable progress—he had, at the expiration of that time, won for himself a fair amount of respect and popularity, which would have been far greater were it not for a circumstance to which I am about to allude.

His establishment was a modest one, and consisted of a small house in an unfrequented street, the lower portion of which was devoted to the shop in which his articles were displayed, and to the storage of his wares. Above this, he lived alone with his sister,

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Sada, who was known by name to his neighbours as Miss Carabet, and with whom he had returned from the East two or three months before. I say known by name, because she had never been seen by any of them. This they naturally regarded in the light of a personal injury, to which insult was added when the most persistent inquiries addressed both to the cook and housemaid—who were themselves townspeople, and burning with curiosity —were absolutely fruitless. Mr Carabet occupied the whole of the first floor, and his sister the whole of the second. She performed all the menial services required to keep her own apartments in order herself, and was known to take her exercise on the leads, because she was a constant object of observation through opera-glasses from the back windows of the upper floors of the houses in the neighbouring street, but they were too far off to enable the observers to distinguish her features. She was always seen drying her clothes upon them, from which it was inferred that she had washed them herself, and this was borne out by the testimony of Mary and Jane. Neither of the servants above named were

allowed to ascend to the second storey: this was a privilege which Mr Carabet reserved for himself. He caused sufficient to be served for two at each of his meals, and always carried up his sister's portion before sitting down to his own. The natural presumption was that she was idiotic or insane; but as her brother usually spent some portion of each day with her, and, so far as could be gathered from the close observation of the servants, treated her with marked consideration and respect, a certain discredit was thrown upon this hypothesis.

There was another mystery connected with Mr Carabet which also exercised the imaginations of his servants—neither of whom, by the way, slept in the house; and this was the locked room on his own floor. Into this room no one but himself was allowed to enter, under any pretext whatever; in fact it was impossible, for he always kept the key in his pocket. Indeed his first act on taking the house was to have a patent lock put on the door. When he was not in the shop, which he usually left in charge of a trustworthy lad, except when he was summoned by a customer, he was

either locked up in this room or up-stairs with his sister, who seemed in some way to assist him in his occupation, for he was constantly carrying small objects up and down.

Visitors who did not come to buy anything were so rare, that both the cook and the housemaid rushed to the top of the kitchen stairs when they heard a rustle in the passage, and great was their astonishment when they saw a lady and gentleman enter Mr Carabet's sitting-room. This was immeasurably increased when, from a coign of vantage on a landing, they watched their master open the mysterious chamber, and usher his visitors into it. But a still more astounding surprise was in store for them; for a few moments later the male visitor issued from the chamber alone, and deliberately walked up-stairs to Miss Carabet's floor, followed about a quarter of an hour afterwards by the female visitor. They must have remained there at least an hour. Mr Carabet, in the meanwhile, had locked himself into his room after his lady visitor had left it, and stayed there until both the lady and gentleman had finished their visit to Miss Carabet; when, summoned by a knock

at the door, he emerged, locked it again, and they all three left the house.

"Well, I never seen the like of it," said Mary to Jane, as they descended to the lower regions to discuss this remarkable incident. "One would ha' thought that old gentleman 'ad stayed up with Miss Carabet twenty years by the look o' him, instead of an hour by the clock. Did you see 'ow he went up two steps at a time, and came down a 'oldin' on by the banisters, as if 'is legs would give way under him, like a old man of eighty?"

"Ah, I did; and I see more than that. There was dimonds in that young woman's ears worth a mint. I couldn't take my hi's hoff of 'em," responded the cook. "A beauty she is, to be sure! Mark my words, Mary,—there'll be a tragiety committed in this 'ere 'ouse some day; and now I know why I dreamt, no longer ago than last night it was, that I was in the witness-box, and Mr Carabet a standin' right hopposite to me, as it might be there, with a rope round 'is neck."

"It may have been meant for an awful warning," said Mary.

"That's just what I says to myself," returned her companion. "A warning received means, by contraries, a warning given, I says; and so soon as Mr Carabet comes 'ome, I'm blessed if I don't give it."

The cook had not long to wait before an opportunity was afforded to her of putting her threat into execution; for Masollam dismissed Carabet at the door of his room with a gesture of impatience, and turning to his daughter as soon as he had disappeared, said, in a voice so feeble as to be almost a whisper—

"I did wrong, Amina, in paying that visit when I did—it will make us late for our appointment; but it cannot now be helped. "Quick," he added, as he sank at full length upon a couch; "put your hands upon my head."

At the same moment, with rapid but trembling fingers, he undid his shirt-collar, and bared the upper part of his chest.

The girl, to whom the injunction seemed familiar, pressed both her palms upon his temples, from which she had drawn back the heavy locks, and stood for a few moments motionless. Then she slowly moved one hand to his forehead, while she placed the

other upon the lower part of the back brain, and again pressed, but in an opposite direction, with the same firm but gentle force. As she did so, her own respiration underwent a remarkable change. The breathing became deeper, fuller, and more prolonged, until her lungs seemed to acquire a power of unnatural expansion, while that of her father appeared altogether to have ceased: his eyes had closed, his whole frame stiffened, as the gentle heaving of his chest subsided into complete quiescence; and, except for a faint colour in his cheeks, which was not the hue of death, he would to a casual observer have presented all the appearance of a corpse. Amina now withdrew her hands from her father's head, and pouring a few drops of a liquid, which had a strong aromatic odour, from a small phial into some water, she steeped her hands in it for a few moments, then taking a chair, she drew it to the side of the couch, and lifting one of the apparently lifeless hands, held it between both her own, watching, as it seemed, for some indication known to herself, to guide her as to her further proceedings. She sat thus for half an hour, motionless, except for the deep,

measured breaths, under the influence of which, at long intervals, her bosom rose and fell. Suddenly her face flushed, a slight tremor shook her whole being, her breath came in short quick gasps, with great apparent difficulty. Instantly letting drop the hand which she had hitherto clasped, she placed her own upon that part of Masollam's chest which was bared, and rubbed it briskly. After a few moments her exertions were rewarded by a quiver of his eyelids, which he slowly raised, drawing a deep, full breath: it seemed as though it were answered by a corresponding change in the respiration of his daughter, and for some minutes their breathing was absolutely synchronous. At last Masollam passed his hand two or three times over his eyes, and said—

"Carabet has been faithless."

"In what respect, father?"

"He has been corresponding with your mother without my knowledge."

"Then she also has been faithless for not telling you of it."

"She acted for the best—she was afraid it might cause me suffering to know it, but she

did wrong: she gave him directions without consulting me, which have resulted in far greater mischief, and therefore suffering, than if she had shown me Carabet's letters."

"Had they reference to Sada?"

"Yes."

"Did she say nothing to you about it before I came up-stairs?"

"What could she say? she knew nothing about it. I only myself knew it a moment ago. It has just been presented to me in a form which has enabled me to read it."

"Did you see anything else—anything to help you in our approaching visit to the Hartwrights?"

"Have you not learnt, child, that the conditions under which I am enabled to penetrate into regions which are closed to the common herd, are encompassed with strict limitations? I was taken away to be made aware of a certain specific fact connected with my own people, and the special influences under which they act. When the time arrives for me to be brought into relations with those which affect the people we are going to see, and revelations are necessary with regard to them, they will

be made to me. However, I have seen something which may be of use;" and he went to a table and wrote hurriedly for a moment. "Meantime," he continued, "the external sources of information which I possess, and the facts which have already come to my knowledge, will suffice for the present. We have not a moment to lose, however, if we are to avail ourselves of them: quick, order the fly."

"It has been standing at the door for the last half-hour, father: I ordered it to be ready at one, before we went out—it is only half-past now; and we can make the man drive fast."

CHAPTER IV.

MR CHARLES HARTWRIGHT'S FINANCIAL CONFIDENCES.

CHARLES HARTWRIGHT had spent so many of the earlier years of his life on the Continent, in connection with his brother's financial enterprises, that he spoke French fluently, and on the entrance of Mr Masollam and his daughter, addressed them in that language with all the *empressement* of a man accustomed to foreign ways, and desirous of making a good impression upon his guests.

"Our mutual friend the Count, to whom I am indebted for the pleasure of making your acquaintance," he remarked, "failed to tell me in his letter whether this was your first visit to England, and whether you are acquainted with our language, which must be my apology for addressing you in French."

"It is the first visit to England of my daughter, but I spent some of the earlier years of my life in this country," remarked Masollam in English; "and as I am anxious that she should acquire English more perfectly, and I myself am a little out of practice, you will be doing us both a kindness to let us continue our conversation in it."

Hartwright complimented his guest, not without reason, on the excellence of his accent, and Mrs Hartwright drew a sigh of relief at finding that her own linguistic acquirements were not to be tested. As two of the young ladies and one of the young gentlemen were present, and the conversation at luncheon turned chiefly upon topics political and social, it is without interest for our readers.

According to a preconcerted scheme, it had been arranged between the worthy couple whose guests the Masollams now were, that after luncheon Mrs Hartwright should take the lady into the garden and estimate her value, and her husband should retire into his study with her father, and judge what use was to be made of him; and that on meeting afterwards, they should signify the result to each other by a certain secret code of signals, and

that Mr Hartwright would be guided thereby as to the nature and extent of the invitation, if any, that was to be extended to them. In pursuance of this arrangement, Mrs Hartwright carried off Amina to the conservatory, to show her some exotics from the East; and Masollam accompanied her husband to his own den, to test the merits of some Syrian tobacco.

"I must apologise for the somewhat disordered condition of the room," said Hartwright; "but the fact is, as Santalba will have perhaps informed you, that we were meditating a trip to the Continent, and I have only put it off at the last moment in consequence of difficulties raised by the man to whom I expected to let my house during my absence."

"The Count merely told me that he thought there were some matters in which my experience might be of service to you, and as I was coming to England at any rate, begged me to lose no time in calling upon you: he is so old and valued a friend of mine, that I was only too glad to think that I could be of use to one with whom, as I understood, he had been so intimately associated in early life."

"We were a good deal thrown together in

some enterprises abroad at one time—for my brother Richard had such a high opinion of his sagacity, that he confided to him many of his most important affairs, in which I was also interested. That some tie of a very close, and I may almost say mysterious nature, existed between them, connected probably in some way with their financial relations, may be inferred from the fact that on his death, which took place a few months before Sebastian came of age, he not only made the Count his son's sole guardian, but made a will leaving his entire property unreservedly to Count Santalba. It seems that there was a private understanding, that on Sebastian's coming of age, the Count should transfer it to my nephew, though this did not appear in the will."

"And did Santalba make the property over to his ward on the latter attaining his majority?" asked Masollam.

"I believe he did. I have no means of knowing exactly. At all events, he made over enough to make my nephew an extremely wealthy man."

Masollam's brow clouded, and for a moment he remained buried in deep thought.

"Go on," he said, suddenly, and in a somewhat more peremptory tone than was quite agreeable to his host.

"I have little more to say," continued that gentleman. "For some time past I have had but little intercourse with Santalba, who seems to have entirely abandoned his old pursuits, and to have withdrawn from the world of which at one time he was a distinguished ornament, and to lead a mysterious and secluded life, apparently connected with a mystical society of some sort, the nature and objects of which none of his old friends have been able to understand. The last time I saw him was at my brother's funeral. Since then he has taken no notice of several letters which I have written to him, the last scarcely a month since, in which I referred to certain difficulties I now find myself placed in. I am happy to think," continued Hartwright, with a polite inclination of the head, "that I am indebted to it for the honour of your visit: it proves at least that he is alive, and that I may still regard him as a friend. Perhaps you can throw some light upon his strange conduct."

"Yes," said Masollam, slowly, with one of his sudden changes of manner, in a voice that sounded to his startled auditor like a distant echo, and eyes so shrunken that they were barely visible in the depths of their enormous recesses, "there is no man living who can throw so much light upon your friend's life as I can; but," he added, and paused as though taking a mental inventory of the moral and intellectual faculties of the man he was speaking to, "it would only dazzle you if I did."

Hartwright felt a shiver pass over him as his singular visitor, whose head had been bowed forward as though in an attitude of intense inquisition, threw it suddenly back, and projected his burning glance upon him. It was as though he had withdrawn the slides of a couple of dark lanterns, as if to give point to his remark.

"Would only dazzle me," he murmured, repeating mechanically Masollam's last words; and making a violent effort to shake off the impression they had produced, he added, "Be it so: I really have no great curiosity in the matter. If it amuses Santalba, it does not

hurt me." He spoke half mockingly, half testily, annoyed with himself at the fleeting emotion he had experienced, and it was a moment or two before he completely recovered his equanimity. After a pause, which Masollam showed no inclination to break, he said at last—

"You are perhaps aware of the contents of the Count's letter?"

"I am," replied his visitor, "and am only waiting to know in what manner I can serve you;" and fitting a cigarette into a long amber mouthpiece, he lit it, as an intimation apparently to his host that he was as patient as he was indifferent on the subject.

Hartwright laid his cheek on his hand, and seemed for some moments lost in meditation.

"Mr Masollam," he said at length, "half confidences are worse than no confidences. I tell you frankly, I should like first to know what your motive is in putting yourself out of your way to try and serve me, before I give you all mine."

"My motive, as I have already told you," replied his guest, "is to serve my friend: that I cannot serve him, or he me, without each of

us serving in one sense himself, arises from the fact that, as our aims and objects in life are identical, our interests must be identical also. What those aims, objects, and interests are, it is impossible, for the reason I have already stated, for me now to impart to you."

"You think they would dazzle me, eh?" said Hartwright, with a sneer.

"Are you in earnest in asking that question?" exclaimed Masollam, with such a sharp, stern emphasis, that Hartwright was taken aback by it.

"I did not mean so much to ask a question," he stammered, "as to repeat what you said. As, however, it is asked, I should be glad to have an answer."

"Pardon me. I do not wish to press you to ask it—we can leave the matter where it is: or if you really desire to know more," —and Masollam leant forward and extended his hand,—"I must request you to place your hand in mine."

Hartwright, anxious to retrieve the breach of politeness of which he had been guilty, did as he was asked, and became instantly aware that he had never felt such an uncom-

fortable hand in his life. He had not observed anything peculiar about it on the occasion of their first meeting, nor could he accurately describe why it was unpleasant now: it was not cold, nor hard, nor clammy—on the contrary, it was warm and soft; but there was an indescribable feeling of thinness and unsubstantiality about it, which did not strike one at the first touch, but seemed to grow upon one the longer the contact was maintained, until it produced a sensation of nervous irritability which became almost unbearable. Hartwright was by no means a man of nervous temperament; but for some time after he got back his hand, he felt, as he told his wife afterwards, as if it was quite different from his other one, and had been tampered with in some way.

Mr Masollam, on releasing the hand of his host, turned upon him a smile of affectionate interest and urbanity as he observed—

"Further investigation convinces me that I was mistaken in my first appreciation. I now perceive that I was wrong in supposing that any light which I might throw upon the subject of your inquiry would dazzle you. The

capacity of being dazzled, implies the capacity of receiving light."

"In other words," said Hartwright, who did not fail to apprehend the full force of this remark, "you mean to convey to me politely that I should be incapable of understanding the aims in life which animate Santalba and yourself."

"I think it possible that, in a vague and general way, you might understand the aims, though it is quite impossible that you could sympathise with them. What you are absolutely incapable of apprehending are the methods we employ to accomplish those aims, and the processes necessary to the achievement of the great ends we have in view. I do not speak thus in a sense which is in any way derogatory to your natural intelligence, which is great. It is not the fault of any man that he was born without an ear for music, and should neither sympathise in the object which Beethoven had in view when he sat down to compose a symphony, nor apprehend the methods by which he arrived at it. You have very fine talents, and cannot do better than use them for the purposes for which they can

be made most available. It has pleased Providence to endow me with gifts of another kind, and, as I have already said, they are at your service—that is to say, if you are satisfied with this explanation, which is the only one I can give you, of my motives for offering them."

There was an assumption of patronising authority and calm superiority on the part of the speaker which was calculated to irritate the vanity of his listener, the more especially as he was conscious that he was being irresistibly imposed upon by it. At the same time, his confidence in Santalba's judgment, and the allusion contained in the letter of the latter, to the danger of his allowing his own narrow prejudices to interfere with his interests, disposed him to weigh carefully in his mind the consequences of rejecting an offer made under such singular conditions. After a few moments' reflection, he came to the conclusion to take Mr Masollam at his own valuation, and to admit him frankly into his confidence.

"You know possibly something of my family and myself from Santalba, and have doubtless heard him speak of my nephew,

Sebastian Hartwright, if you do not know that young man personally," he said.

"I have heard so high a character of him from the Count," returned Masollam, "that it has given me a great desire to make his acquaintance, which I have never had the pleasure of doing."

"I should say he was a young man remarkably receptive of that species of light to which I am unfortunately so blind," rejoined Hartwright, who had not quite got over the feeling of offence to which Masollam's previous remark had given rise. "He is one of the privileged few whom, I understand, Santalba still admits to his intimacy, and indeed entertains views the most strange and fantastic upon many subjects. However, these are not what I now desire to discuss, though it may be necessary to allude to them hereafter. His father and I," pursued Hartwright, after a short pause, "were the only children of a civil engineer who had not made a success of his profession, but who, nevertheless, gave us both a good education, and died in extremely mediocre circumstances. Our mother did not long survive him, and at the age of two- and three-and-twenty we

were left to push our fortunes in the world. It is unnecessary for me to describe the details of my elder brother's rapid and most successful career as a contractor for railways and other public works. They were principally in foreign countries, many of them undertaken in conjunction with the Count, who, though noble, was in early life impecunious, and whose foreign training—for he had been in diplomacy—and extensive knowledge of public men, rendered him a most valuable colleague. Unfortunately, my brother did not entertain the same opinion in regard to myself in that capacity. After associating me in one or two of his earlier enterprises, he left me to push my own fortunes, which I did, *tant bien que mal*, and settled down here some years ago with my wife, having had no great cause to complain of fate. Unfortunately, just before my brother's death we had a rather warm discussion upon a family matter, which left a coolness between us, to which I attribute the fact that he died with barely a mention of me in his will."

"Will you allow me to ask what was the subject of difference?" interrupted Masollam.

"My wife and I thought that it would be desirable, if possible, to bring about a union between my eldest daughter Florence and Sebastian, more especially as the young lady manifested a decided *penchant* for her cousin."

"Was it reciprocated?"

"Not exactly; but Sebastian was an obedient son, and, I have no doubt, would have consented had his father pressed him. This he refused to do on the score of his youth, —hence our difference. But to continue, the whole property, which must amount to nearly a million sterling, invested principally in coal-mines and house property in this town, for which, as you are perhaps aware, Sebastian is the sitting member, was left to Santalba, and, as I have already explained, subsequently transferred to Sebastian by the Count."

"Who appears to have carried out the testator's wishes in a most honourable manner," again interrupted Masollam.

"I am not disputing that; my remark had reference to the fact that, if the matrimonial alliance to which I have alluded was prospectively desirable during my brother's lifetime, it is much more so now that my own

financial position has become compromised, and that his son has inherited his property, and should be much more easy of accomplishment, since the father is no longer alive to throw obstacles in the way."

"Such being so palpably the case, how is it you have not accomplished it? I suppose you have adopted the usual methods for throwing the young people together. I think that is the correct phrase,"—and Masollam smiled with such a sweet expression of sympathy and interest, that Hartwright failed to detect the sneer that it concealed.

"Everything that an affectionate father, a devoted mother, and a daughter as accomplished and dutiful as she is attractive—you will make allowances for a parent's partiality—could do, has been done. Sebastian constantly comes and stays with us when on a visit to his constituency: he is uniformly kind to his cousins, and at times especially so to Florence; but there appears to be some subtle influence at work, which always seems to prevent him from—from—coming to the point, in fact."

"Perhaps he is in love with some one else."

"No; we have been very particular in our

investigations in that matter, through some friends in London who take a warm interest in him, and have excellent opportunities of watching his proceedings, and we are most positively assured that such is not the case."

At this moment the door was opened, and a servant entered with a telegram.

"For Mr Masollam, sir," he said, giving it to that gentleman, but addressing his master, who was instinctively holding out his hand for it.

With an apology for opening it, the recipient cast a momentary and indifferent glance at the contents; then, as he carelessly twisted it into divers shapes, finally thrusting the hand which held it into his pocket, he remarked, with the distant air of a man who is chiefly occupied with the contemplation of his own affairs, and takes no trouble to conceal the fact that he is being bored—

"And you wish to enlist my services in discovering this subtle opposing influence, and overcoming it, eh?"

There are few things more irritating to a man's vanity than to force his most intimate confidences from him, and then to treat them

with levity. And there was a lurking mockery in Masollam's tone as he uttered the last words, and then became suddenly absorbed in watching the convolutions of a wreath of tobacco-smoke, which stung Hartwright to the quick. For the second time during the interview he felt himself invaded, as it were, by such a sensation of antipathy, as to make it difficult for him to resist putting an end to the conversation by an outburst of insolence; but his better judgment suggested, after a moment's reflection, that there was nothing to be gained by quarrelling with his guest, after having in some measure put himself in his power, and that the only course left to him was to smother his indignation, and put his trust in Santalba's recommendation. He determined, however, to waste as few words as possible, and replied with a sullen bluntness, "To make a long story short, I want you to exercise those mysterious powers which Santalba hints that you possess, and to which you seem to make pretension, and bring about a match between my daughter and my nephew."

"By means of a love-philtre, perhaps?" and this time the sneer was undisguised.

"I do not pretend to know the difference between the methods employed by sages and those practised by witches; I have not much confidence in either of them," retorted Hartwright, angrily. "Nor, if you will pardon my saying so, am I aware of my having given you any reason to employ a tone towards me which savours of contempt. Perhaps," he added, with a scornful curl of his lip, "it is because I have not yet alluded to the delicate subject of remuneration for your services; but you must perceive that the sum *en jeu* will furnish an ample margin to meet charges of this nature."

The speaker had scarcely finished the sentence when, to his consternation, his strange guest was seized with an uncontrollable fit of trembling, which lasted for more than a minute.

"What is the matter now? have you caught a chill?" exclaimed Hartwright. "Will you let me send for a glass of wine?"

"Don't chatter any more, but tell me how much money you require at once."

Masollam's eyes were closed as he said this in so low a tone as to be scarcely audible,

while the purport of the remark was so unexpected, that Hartwright literally did not know whether to believe his ears. A prey, for the moment, to a conflict of emotions, his common-sense and urgent needs once more came to the rescue, to save him from an outburst of temper at the rudeness of his guest's exclamation, as he replied somewhat surlily—

"A couple of thousand pounds would give me time to look about: I should still require to let the house."

"It must be to me, then," said Masollam, in the same voice; and he at the same time drew out his pocket-book, with a deliberation that almost amounted to effort, and taking a cheque from it which was already filled up in Hartwright's name, he handed it to his host. To the astonishment of that gentleman, the sum inscribed was exactly the amount he had mentioned, but it was still unsigned.

"Give me a pen," murmured Masollam, barely opening his eyes, as he held out his hand; and on Hartwright complying, he slowly traced his name in the corner. He had no sooner done so than another slight shiver

passed over his frame. He pressed his hands over his eyes for a moment, and then looked up with a total change of feature and of manner. "And now, my dear Mr Hartwright," he said in a natural tone, and with great sweetness of expression, "let me congratulate you on the great temper, tact, and moderation which you have shown throughout this interview, which I have endeavoured to make as short and as little painful to your feelings as possible. When you come to know me better, you will make allowance for my mental and bodily peculiarities: we all have them, you know, only mine are somewhat more marked than those of other people. By the way, Sebastian is rather an uncommon name for an Englishman; how did your nephew come by it?"

Masollam's transitions, both of manner and matter, were so sudden, that Hartwright was still almost too bewildered to reply.

"First," he said, "let me express my thanks for——"

"Don't go back on that now," said Masollam, in a hurried voice almost of alarm.

"But you will surely require security?"

"Stop, will you!" thundered the old man, springing to his feet, and bringing his fist down on the table with such violence that the inkstand clattered; and then, sinking back into his chair, he resumed, "We were talking about that interesting nephew of yours and his singular name."

"Yes," said Hartwright, now completely cowed; "he is called, I imagine, after one of his mother's family. She was a Spaniard. On one occasion my brother was nearly three years absent from England; on his return he came back with a wife and a baby. It was rather a romantic story. She eloped with him from a convent, I believe; but I don't know the particulars. You must apply for them to Santalba, who, I believe, was a connection of the late Mrs Hartwright. In fact, I wonder, as you know him, and show so much interest in the family"—here Hartwright glanced at the cheque—"and know so much about its financial necessities, that you are not familiar with the birth, parentage, and education of us all."

"I am not of a prying nature," said Masollam, with an amiable smile. "Shall we see what has become of the ladies? My dear Mr

Hartwright, your very kind invitation to move from the hotel here has taken me a little by surprise, and I must carry away my daughter now if we are to be back to dinner: ladies are such slow packers, you know."

Of all the shocks which Hartwright had experienced in the course of this one remarkable interview, this was destined to be the most violent and unexpected. What did the man mean by accepting an invitation to "move" from the hotel here, which had never been tendered to him? In fact, Hartwright had only just decided in his own mind to make the signal agreed upon with his wife as a preliminary to offering his guests the hospitality of the house for the night. Masollam observed the shade of annoyance and surprise which his remark had occasioned, and continued—

"You will now be able to postpone your trip abroad indefinitely, and we shall have opportunities while living together of discussing those domestic and financial problems which are vexing your spirit, under conditions which will enable me to judge how they may be solved in the manner you desire—conditions which it was impossible for me to command

during one short interview. Which way?" he asked, for by this time he had walked into the hall, followed by his host, and seemed to regard the arrangement as finally settled.

Hartwright, too much engaged in collecting his thoughts to make any further remark, opened a glass door into a conservatory, through which his wife and daughters, accompanied by Amina, were returning to the house.

"Amina, my child," said Masollam, immediately on seeing her, "Mr Hartwright has been so very kind as to invite us to come and stay with him while we are resident in this part of the country, and in fact has gone so far as to change his own plans and postpone his departure for the Continent indefinitely. As we have important business affairs to settle together, which require our immediate attention, it is necessary that we make the move at once. You will recognise the importance of this prompt action later," he said, turning to his host; "and now I must ask you to allow us to run away for an hour or two. At what time do you dine?"

"At a quarter to eight," replied Hartwright, somewhat surlily. His wife was at that mo-

ment glaring at him with such an expression of indignation and amazement, that he was afraid to manifest a politeness which, to do him justice, he was far from feeling.

The Masollams had scarcely taken their departure, and Mrs Hartwright was giving vent to her pent-up feelings in a higher key, and in stronger language than was quite consistent with her social aspirations, when, to her husband's great relief, and before he had found a moment to enter upon an explanation, she was interrupted by the arrival of another telegram, this time addressed to himself, and which ran as follows :—

"Parliament will be dissolved immediately. Expect me to dinner to-night.—SEBASTIAN."

"The plot seems to be thickening. There is another surprise and another guest for you." And Hartwright dexterously covered his retreat by putting the message into his wife's hands, and vanishing into the sanctum where he had so lately been closeted with his strange visitor. "I wonder," he muttered, as he sank with an intense feeling of relief into his arm-chair, and

his eye fell on the drawer in which he had locked the unlooked-for cheque,—"I wonder whether that old impostor was referring to Sebastian's arrival to-night, when he talked about my soon recognising the necessity of prompt action. It certainly is strange that he should have hit off so precisely the amount I needed, and have forced himself upon us exactly in the nick of time to meet Sebastian."

As he was thus ruminating, Masollam and his daughter were rolling back to town in the fly, and the former was in the act of remarking, as he tore up into minute fragments a telegram which Amina had just been reading, and threw them out of the window—

"Cottrell did that well; it reached me most *apropos*, and the news it contained of Sebastian's intended arrival to-night enabled me to force the situation. Carabet was very accurate in his estimate of our friend's financial needs, too—or rather, I suppose, the butler was; but I never should have thought of taking a cheque for the amount in my pocket, had I not seen myself giving one to some one last night when I was away." Being "away" meant, in Masollam's parlance, the trance con-

ditions into which he was in the habit of falling. "It is a large sum," he added, with a sigh, "but I believe, with care and skilful handling it will turn out a profitable investment. A great deal will depend upon you, Amina, and upon your management of this lad Sebastian."

From which it may be inferred that Miss Masollam was completely in her father's confidence. This, indeed, was the profound conviction of that young lady herself, but it was an error from which I would guard my readers.

CHAPTER V.

MISS FLORENCE HARTWRIGHT'S SENTIMENTAL CONFIDENCES.

When it came to be known to the younger members of the Hartwright family that, for reasons which were not made clear to them, the proposed trip to the Continent had been indefinitely postponed; that Mr Masollam and his daughter had been invited to take up their residence at the family mansion; and that their cousin Sebastian was expected to arrive that evening,—a more than ordinary commotion was produced; while the strain to which Mrs Hartwright's temper was subjected by this sudden revolution of her plans, was not calculated to remove the friction which resulted therefrom. Partially dismantled rooms had to be hurriedly refurnished; extra supplies sent for from town; servants to be persuaded

to resume their functions, who had made arrangements for leaving; trunks to be unpacked; and, worst of all, explanations to be invented, which should satisfy the gossip to which so unusual an occurrence was sure to give rise.

"Oh, bother!" said Laura to Florence, as both those young ladies were standing knee-deep in their respective wardrobes, in the room which they occupied together. "I told Susan to put my pink-satin dress in this trunk—and now I've tumbled everything out on the floor, and it's not there; and Susan has had leave for the afternoon to look for another place, which I hope she has not found—and I've got nothing to wear this evening! I am certain that dress Miss Masollam had on was made in Paris: did you ever see such a lovely fit? I did feel such a dowdy; and it will be worse to-night, with this grey old thing!" and she bestowed a contemptuous kick on a heap of flounces at her feet.

"Don't distress yourself, dear," observed her sister, with a smile so markedly amiable that an experienced observer of young-lady nature would have had no difficulty in translating its meaning; "nothing that either of

you might wear would make any difference. Miss Masollam never could either look or feel a dowdy. It is your misfortune, not your fault, Lal, that you were born one. It is silly to complain now."

Laura cast an envious glance at the tall graceful form of her sister. "It's fortunate you have given up all idea of Sebastian," she remarked; and then, as a bright thought seemed to strike her, she opened her grey eyes and stared into vacancy, as though transfixed with its brilliancy.

"Well, dear," asked Florence, "does that amiable reflection suggest some new idea to you?"

"Indeed it does, Flo. They are meeting here by appointment—I am certain of it. Miss Masollam is just the kind of girl that makes up her mind to marry a million sterling, and does it; and," she added, after a pause, "you are just the kind of girl that makes up her mind to do the same thing, and doesn't."

"There!" she muttered to herself, as she buried her head in her trunk, "that was for saying I was born a dowdy." From which it will appear that, though the Miss Hartwrights bore the reputation among their acquaintances

of being "thoroughly amiable girls," they occasionally departed from their public *rôle* in the privacy of the bed-chamber.

Florence knew her sister too well to prolong the encounter, more especially as the bluntness of her suggestion *lui donnait à penser*. She had anticipated with some little anxiety the possibility of her finding a rival in the beautiful stranger, but it had never occurred to her before that there was likely to be anything preconcerted in the meeting. Still, if such did happen to be the case, it would be better to be on the spot, and judge for herself, than, by going abroad, to abandon the field. For some time past she had encouraged the idea in her family that the match might be considered hopeless, for she had come to the conclusion that unintentionally they were the main obstacles to it. But in point of fact nothing was further from her purpose than to give up the hope upon which the affections of a lifetime had been fixed; and she had good reason for believing that the situation was not so desperate as her father, in his description of it to Masollam, had given the latter to understand.

She well knew, what her parents had failed to perceive, that she was the magnet which attracted her cousin to the house, on the somewhat rare occasions when he honoured it with his presence, and that nothing but the high respect he entertained for his father's memory and wishes while living, the absence of any such respect for his uncle, a marked aversion for his aunt, and an utter want of sympathy with any of the younger members of the family but herself, had interposed a barrier to her own dearest wishes: for it is due to Florence to say that she loved her cousin for his own sake as well as for his money's; though, had he been a poor man, she would have sacrificed her inclination to those more practical views of life in which she had been early trained, and found in the nearness of the relationship an insuperable obstacle to a closer union. "If I had not been so violently thrown at his head in the first place, and so heavily handicapped by my family in the second," ruminated this young lady, as she sat on the edge of the bed and watched her younger sister getting more and more dishevelled in her efforts to construct a suitable toilet,

"there never would have been any difficulty. I could have overcome his scruples about his father's wishes. But now, what with having made a false start and carrying so much weight, if there is to be a rival in the field as well, I shall have my work cut out for me."

Florence had picked up a good deal of racing slang, it will be perceived, from her brothers, besides having sporting proclivities of her own, which she carefully concealed from Sebastian.

"There will be just time," she murmured, as she glanced at her watch; "how lucky it was that papa failed to sell the pony-carriage and ponies!"—a reflection which was suggested by a determination to which the young lady had arrived, as the result of her review of the position of matters generally.

In accordance with the fashion of the period, the Miss Hartwrights enjoyed a large amount of individual liberty; and half an hour later, Florence might have been seen "tooling along," as she would have herself expressed it, in a dainty little turn-out, to the Tongsley station,

to meet the express from London, due at half-past five o'clock.

"Send William and your traps in a fly, and let me drive you home," she said to her cousin, after they had exchanged a cordial greeting; "and don't look so flattered and gratified, sir, at the proposition: I assure you it is justified by the sternest necessity. I want to have a serious talk with you on business, before you see papa. You know"—and she looked up in his face with a pleading expression—"you are our nearest relation; and now that a crisis has arrived in our domestic affairs, who is there but you I can confide in? Papa never tells me anything, but mamma thinks he does, and is jealous of my influence with him. Laura never thinks of any one but herself, and my brothers only of the next sporting events. I am sure they might as well try their hands at writing novels as make the kind of books they do, for all the profit they bring them," continued Florence, ruefully. "The fact is, we are ruined: both the elder boys are over head and ears in debt, and so is papa, and I am sure I don't know what is to become of us."

"He wrote some time ago to tell me he

was in difficulties, and I thought I had given him enough to help him out. I only did it for your sake, Flo," added Sebastian, reddening slightly. "It is the third appeal he has made to me since my father's death; and as he did not reduce his establishment upon a former occasion, when I had made it the condition of my loan, I should have refused him this time had I not felt that you would be the chief victim. You may judge of my surprise, then, when I heard, only a few days ago, that you were on the point of breaking up your home and leaving for the Continent. I should have come down at once, but was detained by the political crisis."

"Well, you have just arrived here in time for a domestic one, for we have undergone another revolution since then," said Florence, "and it is one which causes me the greatest anxiety: that is just why I took the strong measure of coming to meet you alone. There was an old Jew—at least I think he is a Jew, and I strongly suspect he is a money-lender—who came to lunch with us to-day. He was closeted with papa for an hour after lunch, and the result was, that at the end of the

conference we were informed that our Continental trip was given up—we were to have started to-morrow, you know—and that the old man and his daughter are to come and live with us. From what I can make out from mamma, who was too furious to enter upon a full explanation, they seem to have planted themselves upon us indefinitely. What other conclusion was it possible for me to arrive at, than that he has in some way completely relieved papa from all his embarrassments? I am not naturally timid, as you know, Sebastian, but he was really a terrible old man: I never felt such a combination of fear and antipathy for any one. I am sure he has some reason for wanting to get us all into his power. I feel like a fly just beginning to flutter on the edge of a spider's web. Then he has got a daughter. I am sure he uses her for a decoy when he wants to get hold of young men. She's an awfully pretty girl," concluded the young lady, spitefully.

"Why, my dear Flo, you quite take my breath away: this is a domestic revolution with a vengeance, with an interesting touch of mystery in it too. Let us hope that your

heated imagination has exaggerated the gravity of the crisis. I have no doubt I shall be able somehow or other to save the situation. I am glad I arrived so opportunely. Don't alarm yourself about that terrible old man: I shall soon be able to fathom his designs, if he has any, and those of his lovely daughter."

"I didn't go so far as to say she was lovely, or that she had any designs," said Florence, with a pang. And she half thought of verifying the suspicion which had produced it, by asking her cousin if he had ever heard of a Miss Masollam; but she changed her mind, and simply added, "Well, I hope you may find it as easy to arrange as you seem to think. Don't say anything of all this, or seem to know anything, when you meet papa and mamma. I only wanted to prepare you, and consult with you as to what it is best to do."

"It is impossible for me to give any opinion upon the subject until I am in full possession of all the facts."

"I feel a presentiment of misery," said Florence; and she added a pocket-handkerchief to the whip and reins she already had in her hands, so as to be prepared for the

next emergency. "It is very cruel of papa to drag his children through all this humiliation, and let entire strangers into the bosom of his family,—and such strangers." Here she applied the handkerchief. "I do hope you will be able to see a way out of it, for me at all events. I don't think any of the others feel the degradation of it all as I do." Here she removed the handkerchief, and looked up at him with eyes that had not become red, but were most becomingly brimming.

As Hartwright gazed into them, and wondered whether they were going gently to overflow or not, he felt an irresistible desire to stay a trembling drop with something more consolatory than words. She looked at the moment so beautiful and so unhappy, and he felt such deep pity for her woe—the road, moreover, at this spot was so deserted—that he ventured to impress a cousinly kiss upon her forehead, merely as an evidence of fraternal sympathy. He could not, however, resist the impulse, which was not quite so brotherly, of saying—

"Never mind, dear, whatever may happen to the others; perhaps, so far as you are per-

sonally concerned, there may be a way out of it." And then in a panic lest he should be still further betrayed by his feelings, he added, as he remembered all the objections to a marriage, towards which he was now rather prompted by compassion and a long-standing intimacy than urged by any more powerful sentiment,—"But it is quite impossible to decide anything until I know more. I was only thinking"—and in his attempt to extricate himself from the false position into which he was floundering, he made matters worse—"that, somehow or other, we must take care that you are not sacrificed to—ahem—to, ah, any old Jew money-lender, you know."

The girl, who, during this tender passage, had allowed her ponies to drop into a walk, looked up at her cousin with a startled and horrified expression.

"Why, Sebastian," she exclaimed, "what can you mean? how could I personally be sacrificed to this man? I told you everything, thinking that you would say something to console me, and instead of that you say things that quite terrify me,"—and this time the brimming eyes overflowed in real earnest.

"My dear Florence, I assure you I didn't mean anything," said poor Sebastian, once more a prey to his natural tenderness of heart. "I don't know enough to be able to mean anything that can alarm you. All I wish you to understand is, that whatever happens, you must put perfect trust and confidence in my affection, and that, rather than see your happiness endangered permanently, I would ask you,"—he was going to add, "to find a refuge in the love which I offer you," when he was interrupted by the rattle of a rapidly approaching carriage, which seemed so close behind them as to cause him to look round, while Florence made way for it to pass. As it did so, a fair face appeared at the window, and its owner, as she bowed smilingly to Florence, accompanied her salutation with an almost imperceptible sign of recognition to Sebastian, which that gentleman was too much confounded with amazement to acknowledge until it was too late. His spasmodic attempt to do so, however, and the glance to which it was the response, were not lost upon his cousin, who exclaimed—

"Good heavens, Sebastian, do you know her?"

"I met her only two nights ago in the gallery of the House of Commons, and it was certainly rather a surprise to me to see her turn up so suddenly and unexpectedly here. She seemed a mysterious sort of person, with an odd name—Masollam, I think it was. But how on earth does she come to know you?"

"My acquaintance dates from a still more recent period. I only saw her at lunch to-day for the first time. Her father is the old money-lender you have just been sacrificing me to," said Florence, somewhat bitterly. "Perhaps you know him too?"

"I did not know she had a father," replied Hartwright, who fell into a fit of musing which lasted till they reached the lodge gates, and which Florence was too much preoccupied with her own thoughts to wish to disturb. If these were somewhat of an agitated character, they were not altogether unpleasing. Never before had her cousin so nearly committed himself in the sense she desired; for if it is not exactly complimentary to be married out of compassion to the man one loves, it is, at all events, better than not being married to him at all. Had it not been for the inoppor-

tune appearance of the lovely vision at the carriage-window at the most critical moment of her cousin's speech, all uncertainty might now have been at an end. But the golden moment was lost. The suddenness of the surprise, and the turn it gave to the conversation, made it impossible for her to lead her companion back to the delicate ground he was treading with such hesitating steps, when he was suddenly scared off it. Would so lovely a face be one of evil omen, destined ever to come between her and the fulfilment of her hopes? Was it only her own heated imagination, as this vague presentiment shot through her, that read in those lustrous eyes a glance of warning and of menace? And as the startled look of her cousin recurred to her memory, and she observed the reverie into which he had since fallen, her suspicions took more definite shape, till the plant of hope which but a moment before had been so vigorously pushing forth its tender shoots seemed slowly to wither before them, and the possibility contained in her sister's suggestion that the meeting had been prearranged, seemed to acquire stupendous proportions. Yet she knew

Sebastian to be the soul of truth, as he was of honour, and had such been the case, he never would have said that it was a surprise to him to meet her. On the other hand, why did Miss Masollam seem so perfectly self-possessed? and why, even if the meeting was unexpected on the part of her cousin, should it have produced so marked an effect upon him? —and she once more uneasily glanced at him, as she pulled up with rather a stylish flourish at the door of the paternal mansion. "There is a mystery somewhere, and it's a very uncomfortable one," she muttered, as she consigned Sebastian to the servant who was to conduct him to his uncle, while she tripped up to her room to dress for dinner,—"but I will get to the bottom of it before I go to bed."

In common with other young ladies of the period, Florence Hartwright had a profound confidence in her own power of grappling with any mystery, and of solving it at the shortest notice. She had yet to learn that the more deeply you dive after solutions, the more hopelessly entangled do you become in problems.

CHAPTER VI.

SEBASTIAN DOES SOME DETECTIVE WORK.

WHATEVER defects may attach to the character of Orientals, there is one from which they are conspicuously free,—they are never snobs. This reflection suggested itself to Sebastian when, upon the occasion of his first introduction to Masollam, he contrasted the dignified bearing of that gentleman with that of the master of the house. A moment after, Mrs Hartwright entered the room where they were assembling before dinner, followed by Miss Masollam, and the comparison was again unfavourable to the former. Where, he wondered, could these strangers have picked up these manners of perfect self-possession? Had they been accustomed to good society, or was it to be attributed to the instinctive good-

breeding of the race from which they sprang; and if so, what was that race? His cousins were already in the room as he pondered thus, and he felt that Florence's eye was fixed upon him, as he overheard one of her brothers murmur to the other, as he stared in open-eyed admiration of the stranger, that she was "a regular screamer." Miss Masollam made no sign of recognition, but waited until Sebastian was formally presented to her, when she quietly remarked, in a tone audible to the whole company—

"I am so sorry, when you called upon me in London, that I missed you. Indeed it could not be helped. It must be so. I did not much mind, because I knew soon I should see you. I told Reginald Clareville to tell you so. Did he indeed give my message?"

With a smile of fascinating innocence, a captivating foreign accent, and in these simple little broken sentences, did Miss Masollam explode her first shell in the midst of the Hartwright family.

Charles Hartwright glanced at his nephew. How was it, thought that gentleman, that when, half an hour before, he had told him

that he was to meet Mr and Miss Masollam, who had been invited to come and stay some time in the house, Sebastian had been silent as to his having any previous knowledge of them? This was decidedly suspicious, and Charles Hartwright was a man of suspicious temperament.

"Who is this girl," mentally exclaimed Mrs Hartwright, "who calls Mr Clareville 'Reginald' in this familiar way?" and she bitterly remembered a futile attempt she had once made to get invited to one of Lady Clareville's drums, and the refusal of her nephew to use his influence to procure her an invitation.

"I told you so," telegraphed Laura to her sister in an expressive glance. "You see she openly admits that she was to meet him here."

"So Sebastian called on her in London! he never told me that," thought Florence, flushing uneasily under her sister's triumphant gaze. "What a minx that Laura is!" and she darted a sisterly look at her to that effect.

"O naughty Sebastian," whispered the

younger brother to the elder; "who would ever have suspected that you could have a little game on of this sort? Look at his face, Ned."

It is an unfortunate circumstance that the expression of conscious innocence in a highly sensitive nature, which feels itself an object of unjust suspicion, is often, in the eyes of prejudiced and superficial observers, not to be distinguished from that of conscious guilt. The flushed cheek, the embarrassed manner, the stammering utterance, is in point of fact as likely to be the result of one as the other: it is purely a matter of temperament in both cases, and nothing can be more fallacious than to allow evidence of this nature to have any weight. But the Hartwrights were not a philosophic family; and even if they had been, the conflicting passions by which they were at that moment animated, would have put it out of their power to judge calmly. Being of a perfectly frank and loyal nature, and a gentleman to the tips of his fingers, Sebastian said, after a momentary hesitation, and with a somewhat heightened colour—"Clareville gave me your message; but I confess I had no idea its pur-

port was so soon to be realised. It was a matter of regret both to him and myself, when we called, that we had not the pleasure of seeing you. If I had known you were to be here," he added, with a light laugh, recovering himself somewhat, "I think I should have taken the liberty of bringing Reginald down with me."

"Insolent puppy!" internally ejaculated Charles Hartwright; "he talks as if the house was his own." As he thought thus, he became conscious that Masollam's eye was fixed upon him, and felt irresistibly impelled to meet it. "It's true," he mentally added as he did so. "I am no longer master nor in my own house; it is that brute's leave he must ask."

"I wish you had brought him," said Mrs Hartwright to herself; and this reflection was mentally responded to by all the younger members of the family—so that when Miss Masollam said, "I wish you had brought him," it seemed an echo of their thoughts.

"It is not too late now—he is still in town; shall I telegraph?" asked Sebastian. But the query was not addressed to his uncle, whom he seemed unconsciously to ignore in

his desire to gratify the wishes of the fair stranger.

"I like him very much—he is so clever," she said in reply.

"An excellent suggestion, Mr Hartwright," said Masollam; "I know you agree with me."

"An excellent suggestion," murmured that gentleman, mechanically.

"Oh, quite too charming! do telegraph for him," exclaimed Mrs Hartwright, now that her husband had expressed his approval.

"Capital fellow, Clareville," chimed in the youths, who only knew him by sight.

"There's a *prix de consolation* for you," whispered Laura to her sister; "why don't you join in the general chorus of approbation?" But at that moment dinner was announced.

"It will be time enough if I telegraph after dinner—he will get it the first thing in the morning," said Sebastian, as, by Mrs Hartwright's desire, he offered his arm to his cousin, and led her in to dinner.

This was the telegram which Reginald Clareville's servant handed his master the

following morning, when he entered the bedroom of that gentleman to prepare his matutinal tub—

"Amina Masollam desires see you here immediately. Curious affair. Do come. Name hour arrival. I will meet you station.—Sebastian."

"That ought to fetch him," the sender had said to himself, while penning the above missive — and he was not mistaken. After a few moments of hesitation, in which perplexity and surprise were mingled with doubt as to whether he could free himself from various existing engagements, Clareville suddenly seized a pen, as if impelled by an overpowering impulse, and scribbled off in reply, "Expect me at half-past 5 P.M." Even his servant was struck with the haggard countenance of his master as he took the telegram, and would have been still more surprised if he could have heard the soliloquy which followed.

"I am too miserable for it to matter much what I do," muttered Reginald. "What an extraordinary night I have had! Thank God, I conquered at last—my mind is made up. I have no longer a career that can be ruined,

or a life that can be blasted, or political prospects that can be thrown away. I feel like a craft wrecked by a moral tempest which has suddenly and most unaccountably sprung up, and is driving me I know not whither : meantime, any port is good in a storm, so I'll run for the one Sebastian so unexpectedly offers, and do my best in the interval to repair damages, and clear away the traces of my agony."

Meantime Sebastian had determined that he would preserve an attitude of apparent indifference, and not attempt, by broaching the subject either to Masollam or his uncle, to solve the enigma of the presence of the strangers in the Hartwright family until he had received his friend's reply. "For," he ruminated, "two heads are better than one in a business of this sort, and Clareville is just the sort of fellow to tackle the girl, while I devote my detective faculties to her father." So he allowed it to be supposed that he was about to drive into Tongsley on his own affairs. Before starting, however, he had taken the opportunity of saying privately to his cousin Florence, "Find out if you can

from Miss Masollam, quite by accident as it were, and without exciting her suspicion, what hotel they stayed at in town. Don't press the point if it does not come naturally, as I can easily find out otherwise; only I want to avoid as much as possible attracting attention to them by making inquiries."

As Florence was a young lady not devoid of intelligence, as the reader will have already perceived, she found no difficulty in carrying out her cousin's instructions.

"Oh, perhaps you can tell me," she exclaimed, running up, with an open letter in her hand, to Miss Masollam, who was taking a stroll in the garden just after breakfast. "I have just heard from a friend who is coming to spend a few days at Tongsley with her husband, who has some business here, and she asks whether we can recommend the new hotel, which has just been finished at the station. It has been so lately opened, that I have not met any one who has tried it: did you go there?"

"No," replied Amina; "we went to the George."

And it was straight to the George that

Sebastian, on receiving this piece of information, drove. On thinking over the matter in the silent watches of the night, it had occurred to him that a foreigner like Masollam would not enter into important financial transactions with Hartwright, whom he had never known or seen before in his life, without the assistance of some local attorney. And he now made inquiries at the George with the view of finding out whether the strangers had either received or made visits during their stay at the hotel. Here he heard that they had been brought there by Carabet, and gone out with Carabet, had been closeted with Carabet, and in fact seemed to have had no communication with any one but him. After obtaining all the information he could about that Oriental and his curiosity-shop, he determined to proceed thither on foot; and this he did all the more readily, as he was something of a numismatist.

Mr Carabet was disposing of a piece of *cloisonné* enamel, with a languid and indifferent air, to a lady for whose judgment in such matters he evidently entertained small respect, when Sebastian entered, and asked to be shown

some antique coins. The dealer's face immediately brightened, and, relegating his customer to his assistant, he produced a drawerful for Sebastian's inspection, watching narrowly, as he did so, the face of the latter as he turned over the contents. It was a very important matter in Mr Carabet's trade for him to form, as speedily as possible, an accurate estimate of the amount of knowledge possessed by those who came to purchase his wares. When, therefore, Sebastian remarked, after an inspection which lasted only a few moments, that he could not find a coin in the whole collection worth buying, and was turning away with a disappointed air, Carabet hastily exclaimed—

"Wait, sir; I have more"—this time leaving the shop, to return with a tin box, which he unlocked, and exhibited to his customer's appreciative gaze a very different assortment.

"You guard your treasures preciously from the common herd, I see," said Sebastian, smiling. "Have you never heard that the love of money is the root of all evil?"

"Not such very, very old money as this,

sir. No harm to love old money; to love new money very bad."

"I am glad you think so. Is that the general opinion in the country you come from?"

"No, sir; everybody loves money there, just the same as here."

"I suppose they don't make it so easily, or you would not have left it to come here?"

"Perhaps," replied Carabet, in a manner which did not altogether imply assent to this proposition.

"Where did you pick up this coin?" asked Sebastian.

"At Bagdad."

"And this one?"

"At Damascus."

"And this?"

"At Ispahan."

"I suppose you made some place your head-quarters? Where did you generally live in the East?"

"No, I never lived very long in one place. Here is indeed a rare coin," he added, changing the subject.

Sebastian saw that the man, who was ap-

parently in Masollam's confidence, was not one likely to be led into betraying it, and being afraid to excite suspicion by further inquiries, was about to make a purchase and take his departure, when Carabet was suddenly informed by his assistant that he was wanted. While his customer was waiting for his return to complete his purchase—too delicate a matter to be negotiated by an assistant—he overheard a loud female voice in what appeared to be the back passage.

"It's no use a-threatenin' nor a-arguin', Mr Carabet—I aint a-goin' to stay out my month in this 'ouse. If there aint been crimes in it already, it's my opinion as there will be. I told you the same thing yesterday."

"Not so loud, my good woman." And Sebastian could hear Carabet continue in low tones of expostulation, which seemed to pro duce an effect, though their purport was in audible, for the shrill voice replied—

"Well, if you let me see the woman you keep bottled-up up-stairs, and call your sister, as nobody 'as ever seen, except that old man and the lady as was with him yesterday, and let me wait upon her, I don't say but what I'll stay."

"What a row that woman is making!" said Sebastian to the assistant, with well-feigned impatience. "Who is she?"

"The cook a-givin' warning," replied the youth, with a grin.

"Well, tell your master I could not wait; I shall probably look in again."

"Now for the cook," he said to himself, as he regained the street. "I am not sure that this sort of amateur detective work is very reputable," he reflected, with a certain misgiving; "but it is certainly exciting, and I don't think I do it badly; and," he mentally added, "besides, it is justified by the circumstances." It was perfectly clear to Sebastian's mind that the visitors on the previous day could be none other than Masollam and his daughter, but the mysterious prisoner was a new feature. He thought he would linger a few minutes in the neighbourhood of Carabet's residence, to cross-examine the cook in case she left it. He had not long to wait, for Carabet had failed to accede to her terms, to judge by the flounce with which she issued from the house and slammed the door behind her.

"I beg your pardon," said Sebastian, ad-

dressing her with great politeness; "but by the merest accident I overheard you just now, when I was buying something in Mr Carabet's shop, give him warning, and his assistant told me you were a cook: is that so?"

"It is, sir," she said, still flushed with her late encounter.

"I suppose you will have to look for another place?"

"Yes, sir,"—and this time she dropped a little anticipatory curtsey.

"Well, if you will give me your name and address, and your references suit, perhaps you may not have far to go to find one." And Sebastian took out his pocket-book to make the necessary entry.

"Jane Slocum, sir, 3 Hartwright's Buildings," dictated the cook.

Hartwright's Buildings were a row of model lodging-houses for miners, which had been erected by Sebastian's father. A bright idea suddenly occurred to him. "If you go home at once, I will be with you in half an hour—you can get there by tramway in that time." And he hurried off, leaving Jane not a little flustered and bewildered, but convinced from

the gentleman's manner that the appointment was in earnest, and not one to be neglected. In half an hour to the moment, Florence's pony-carriage, of which Sebastian had taken possession for the morning, was pulled up in the suburban lane one side of which was occupied by Hartwright's Buildings, and Jane was standing at the door of No. 3 to receive her visitor, by whose equipage she was duly impressed.

"Now," he said, as he sat down in the little parlour, "I must first tell you who I am, because I am going to place great confidence in you. I am glad to find that I know your father well, as one who has been in my father's employ, as well as in my own, for many years. My name is Hartwright."

"What! Mr Sebastian Hartwright, our member of Parliament, and owner of the mine, and all these houses, sir?" ejaculated the cook, while she dropped a curtsey, quite out of keeping with the position of her hands, which were uplifted in amazement.

Sebastian nodded, with a smile, and continued: "I overheard what you said to Mr Carabet about the woman he keeps confined

up-stairs, and allows no one to see. I quite understand your disinclination to remain in a house where there is a mystery of this sort; but I have a particular interest in desiring to get at the bottom of it. What I wish to propose to you is to return at once to Mr Carabet, to tell him that you have thought over the matter and have changed your mind, and will remain with him as cook. If you will render me this service, I will triple the monthly wages you now receive from him; but I should expect you to be silent as to any knowledge of me, and to report to me everything you can learn of Mr Carabet's establishment, and those who frequent it, especially any visits which he may receive again from that lady and gentleman who called upon him yesterday. You can always see me while I am staying with my uncle, by sending me a message from the mine, where I will meet you when you have anything to communicate. You need not be afraid of doing this for me, as I am not prompted by any feeling of enmity towards any of those in regard to whom I desire information. On the contrary, I shall only be too delighted if the whole of what seems a mys-

tery can be satisfactorily explained, and if it can be shown that there has never been any ground for suspicion; but the happiness of some persons for whom I have a regard is at stake, and I do not wish it to be sacrificed. I do not ask you to listen at doors or play the spy, but merely to keep me informed of what comes under your notice. I dislike mysteries, particularly when they are connected, however remotely, with those in whom I feel an interest; and this is the case in the present instance."

If the truth must be told, Sebastian felt more scruples about making the proposition he was doing, than Jane Slocum in accepting it. The prestige which she would enjoy in her own eyes by rendering Hartwright the service he required of her, and the prospect of so large an increase to her salary, quite reconciled her to the humiliation of asking to be taken back into the service of her master; and so far from having scruples on any other score, she determined in her own mind to exceed her instructions. So Sebastian drove back well satisfied with his morning's work, more mystified than ever since he had heard of the re-

cluse in Carabet's establishment, and not without recourse to a good deal of metaphysical hair-splitting, to which he was obliged to resort, to justify the course he was pursuing by the interests of morality in general, and of his cousin Florence in particular. He was, however, too honest an analyst of his own sentiments not to admit that he was conscious of a remarkable power of fascination in Amina Masollam, and of a no less strange but more unaccountable attraction towards her father, —and this in spite of a distinct effort on his part to resist both.

CHAPTER VII.

DOMESTIC AFFAIRS AT THE TURRETS UNDERGO A CHANGE.

While Sebastian was employed in the manner described in the last chapter, the various actors in the drama, whom he left behind at The Turrets, were not altogether idle. Florence had been captured by her brothers, and carried away into a small den redolent of cavendish tobacco, and ornamented with guns, fishing-rods, brier-wood pipes, and sporting pictures, for the purpose of being "pumped" in regard to the strange and inexplicable turn of events, which had so far completely baffled conjecture on the part of the two youths in their vain attempts to read the riddle of the past twenty-four hours. They got small satisfaction from the young lady, however, whose dexterous

evasion of any direct replies only stimulated their curiosity the more, and while it heightened their opinion of her sagacity — as she intended it should — confirmed them in the conviction that she was in the secret; an impression which, considering her complete ignorance of it, she succeeded in conveying with great adroitness. But then, as she had more than once remarked to her father, when confidentially discussing with him her brothers' prospects in life, "they were such a pair of duffers." Mrs Hartwright, who was occupied in performing precisely the same operation upon her husband in his sanctum, was more successful, and was not long in extracting from him a detailed account of all that had transpired during his interview with Masollam on the previous day, and of the manner in which the latter had unexpectedly come to his financial relief. Mrs Hartwright rather piqued herself on her talent for understanding men in general, and her husband in particular; and that she had some ground for this opinion may be gathered from the fact, that though she had been dying of curiosity to know all about it, ever since she had, in an unguarded

moment, given vent to her indignation the day before on being forced into an unexpected change of plan, she was able to control her natural propensities until she felt that her husband was beginning to lose a little of his self-confidence, and to crave for some of that feminine counsel and advice in which, sooner or later, he was always glad to find a refuge. Mrs Hartwright was in the habit of remarking, with a self-satisfied air, that Florence had inherited some of this talent—a fact which did not prevent her feeling a certain secret jealousy of her daughter, as it may be remembered that young lady had already hinted to Sebastian. While these several interviews were taking place, Masollam and his daughter were also engaged in a *tête-à-tête* on a bench under an old oak-tree, which they had discovered in the most remote and retired part of the grounds. Of the three conversations which were going on at the same time on the same subject, it is the only one worth reporting.

"You will understand, Amina," Masollam was saying, in allusion to his interview with Hartwright on the preceding day, "that when he so totally misconceived our relative posi-

tions as to venture to allude to what he called remuneration in return for my services, it was necessary for me at once to reverse his ideas on the subject. He is a hard, bad man, who must be held with an iron grip. There are times when the subtle influences which radiate from his perverted nature cause me excruciating torture."

And here I must explain to the reader that I have a difficulty, not only in translating Mr Masollam's words from the language in which he was speaking, but in finding terms in which to express the ideas they contained, and which were derived from the conditions by which his organism was affected, and by which it was rendered susceptible to physical sensations, the nature of which were determined by the moral states of those with whom he was brought into contact. As illustrations of this phenomenon will hereafter probably occur in the course of the narrative, I will refrain from any further description of them now. That they were not peculiar to him, however, may be gathered from the remark which his last observation called forth from his daughter.

"I quite sympathise with you, father," she said. "I am afraid our life in this house, so

long as its present occupants remain in it, will be full of suffering to us both. In obedience to your instructions, I have been rendering myself sensitive to Florence."

"Well, dear, and what have you found?" asked the old man.

"I have been feeling very little yet but pain. She is not without high impulses and grand qualities," she added after a pause, "but she is vain, selfish," and she murmured, hesitatingly, "not altogether loyal."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean she is not altogether loyal either to her own highest impulses or her own warmest affections—in other words, to those she loves best."

"And whom does she love best?"

"Her cousin Sebastian."

"Does he return her affection?"

"Not in the sense she desires."

"Have you put yourself *en rapport* with him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"The time has not yet come," and a slight tremor shook the girl's frame; then, with a

sudden start, as though rousing herself from the dreamy manner in which she had been replying to her father's questions, she asked, "Has it, father?"

"No, my child, your instinct is right; but it soon will. Do you know what is the service Mr Charles Hartwright desires me to render him?"

Amina closed her eyes, and seemed lost in meditation.

"I think I can guess," she said at last. "To bring about a marriage between Florence and her cousin."

"Exactly so; and do you know why you and I have hurried here?"

"To prevent it."

"You are right again. I feared lest Sebastian should be led by his compassion to perform an act to which he would not have been prompted by his affections, and which he might have had serious cause to regret."

"You were right, father—you always are," and the girl looked up lovingly; "he has a generous nature and a tender heart."

"His friend will come to-day—at least I think so."

"I think so too," said Amina.

"Then you know what is in store for us both?"

"Yes."

"Do you think we are strong enough to bear the burden between us?"

"I can tell better after he arrives. I suppose," she continued, with a sigh, "that I shall have to undertake him?"

"Yes: leave Sebastian to me for the present. If we need reinforcements, we must send for Santalba and your mother."

As one result of the conversation which had taken place between Hartwright and his wife was, that the latter insisted on knowing whether Masollam had taken The Turrets definitely, and if so, for how long and at what rent, Mr Hartwright was now seen approaching in search of his guest, and the Masollams rose to meet him. After the abrupt manner in which the Oriental had terminated the interview on the previous day, Hartwright felt at some loss in recurring to the business part of the financial transaction which had then been so strangely forced upon him. He was emboldened, however, by perceiving a peculiarly

gentle expression on the countenance of the old man, who, as they turned back towards the house, slipped his arm into that of his host with an air of confiding familiarity, and said, with a smile, "Let us go for a few moments into your study and complete the arrangements which I was unable to attend to yesterday. I don't think I am mistaken," he added, as he stopped suddenly and laid his hand on Hartwright's shoulder; "it was for this purpose you came to look for me?"

It gave the person he addressed a peculiarly disagreeable sensation to find his thoughts and acts divined in this way, but he was rapidly arriving at the point where nothing that Masollam could say or do astonished him.

"Naturally," he replied, with a short uneasy laugh, "I knew that matters could not be left as they were, and felt sure that you would be prepared at the first convenient opportunity to discuss a few remaining details."

"'Discuss' is not, I think, the right word," replied Masollam, again taking his companion's arm and moving on. "See, Amina, there is Miss Hartwright making a bouquet! Go and

help her. Now, my dear Mr Hartwright," he continued, when his daughter had left them, " I suppose you wish to know whether I am your guest or you mine. I think I can relieve your mind on this point. From this moment you are mine, if—as I am sure you will be—you are prepared to fall into the arrangement I am about to propose. I will take your house for a year, with the right of renewal at the expiration of that term, at the rent which you had agreed upon with the gentleman who wished to have the repairs of the stables made at your expense. I will make no such stipulation. As I think it is desirable in your own interest that you and your family should remain for some time longer in this country, I will ask you all to continue to live in this house, without making any apparent change in your establishment, the style of which suits me very well. There is no need even for the servants to know at present that we pay them, and not you. These are domestic questions, the details of which Amina and Mrs Hartwright will have no difficulty in settling. If you have any delicacy in accepting my hospitality

on these terms, you and your wife can arrange with my daughter what proportion you should contribute to the general expenses : these are matters which I do not trouble myself about. In case you should desire to invite any friends to visit you here, I should expect first to be consulted in regard to them ; but in case I desire to invite friends of mine, I should wish to reserve to myself the privilege of doing so, without consulting you. Should I find, in order the better to carry out our joint purposes, that it would be desirable for you and your family to leave the house exclusively to me and mine, I will give you a week's warning of any such necessity, which, I hope, will be sufficient. No one need know anything of the details of this arrangement, except your wife and my daughter."

"How about the lawyer who draws the lease?" asked Hartwright.

"He will only know that he has drawn the lease; and, I suppose, he can hold his tongue about that. Lawyers are not generally communicative."

"This proposition is so novel, and involves so many domestic matters for consideration,

that I am sure you will not expect me to decide with reference to it until I have consulted my wife."

"Send for her to come here at once, then." The peremptory tone in which Masollam uttered these words, suggested the idea to Hartwright that the Oriental was not accustomed to disobedience on the part of his own womenkind, and gave him a pang of envy. "Perhaps I had better go myself," he said; and after ushering Masollam into his study, which they had now reached, he departed, not without sundry misgivings, in quest of the lady of the house.

I will not trouble the reader with the details of an interview which resulted in an arrangement being concluded in the sense desired by Masollam, the advantages of which, so far as the Hartwright family were concerned, were put before Mrs Hartwright in so tempting a light, and she and Miss Masollam were left so completely mistresses of the domestic situation, that any doubts which at first suggested themselves to her mind, were speedily overborne by the serene reflection that a young girl from the East, who had never

been in England in her life, would necessarily be a mere puppet in her hands, and that practically her own prestige and an expensive establishment would be maintained chiefly with Mr Masollam's money. There were, moreover, several little household points on which Mr Masollam made concessions; while the confidence he showed in her capacities as a domestic manager, and the compliments he paid her, confirmed her in her conviction that her penetration of human nature, and especially of male human nature, was superior to that of her husband. She felt that Providence had, in the moment of their extremity, sent them an oriental millionaire, on whom she could exercise the peculiar talent upon which she prided herself, of "managing men."

Only one little point remained to be settled between Hartwright and his tenant—but here Masollam's manner suddenly changed. His eyes seemed to go out like extinguished lamps. His voice became hollow and distant, and his brow contracted, as if from pain. Slowly and with apparent effort he said—

"I will take that receipt for the £2000 that you talked about yesterday. I can now do, as

your host and tenant, what, for reasons that it is unnecessary to explain, it would have been premature to do then."

Hartwright, as he made out the receipt, puzzled himself in vain to think what these reasons could be, and handed it to Masollam, who, with an abstracted air, placed it in his voluminous pocket-book, and then abruptly rose and left the room.

"Ouf!" said Hartwright, stretching himself, with a sigh of intense relief. "Thank God, he is gone; his very presence seems to stifle me sometimes. What an old man of the mountain he is!"

"I am sure I don't know what you mean, Charles, by 'an old man of the mountain.' If it is a term of reproach, Mr Masollam does not deserve it. You men never understand one another. Now, the more I see of him, the more perfectly charming do I think him. Could anything be more generous and delicate than his conduct has been throughout? You will see in a week I shall be able to——" And Mrs Hartwright performed a revolutionary movement with her two forefingers, to indicate the facility with which she intended

to turn Mr Masollam round them. "Old man of the mountain!" she repeated, indignantly; "he is quite too darling an old man."

"There is Sebastian come back," said her husband, glad to change the subject, as he heard the rattle of the pony-carriage, "and there is the luncheon-bell. He ought to have had an answer from Clareville by this time. It is very fortunate that he seems to have been too much occupied with his own affairs to think of meddling with ours. I expected his visit portended a storm, when I found he was coming down in such a hurry, and that he had discovered that the last loan I got out of him, on the understanding that it would clear me of all embarrassments, left me as deeply dipped as ever. I wonder his curiosity has not been more excited, considering our sudden change of plans and the strange guests he has found here."

"If you comprehended men better," retorted Mrs Hartwright, "you would understand that he did not come here to make a storm, as you call it, but to make love."

"Why, Florence told me herself she had given up all hope of him."

"Bah! I do believe you understand women less than men."

"Why not call me a fool at once?"

"Because you are not, Charles—except in some things, and love-making is one of them."

"You did not think so once."

"Oh, don't rake up old scores—it was I that was the fool then. Let us come in to lunch."

The party were all assembled in the dining-room when Sebastian entered it. Turning to Miss Masollam—"Your friend, Mr Clareville, will be here this afternoon," he said.

Florence's eyes were fixed on Amina as the latter received this piece of intelligence, and she saw, or fancied she saw, something in that lovely and expressive countenance which sent a thrill of hope and of triumph through her whole being. "It is not Sebastian, but Clareville, she loves, and has come here to meet." The thought flashed upon her with the force of a revelation. "Dear Miss Masollam," she said aloud, "here is a chair; won't you come and sit next me?"

CHAPTER VIII.

MR REGINALD CLAREVILLE'S POLITICAL CONFIDENCES.

"Good heavens! old man, what is the matter? How ill you are looking!" was Sebastian's first exclamation on meeting his friend at the Tongsley station the same afternoon.

"Yes, I feel rather seedy; that was why I accepted your invitation so promptly. I hope it is only a temporary fit of indigestion; but I am not quite sure whether it is the salmon or the political crisis which has disagreed with me. I was suffering morally as well as physically all last night anyhow. Now, tell me where we are going," added Reginald, changing the subject abruptly, as they took their seats in Florence's pony-carriage.

"To The Turrets—my uncle's house."

"Your uncle's house!" exclaimed Reginald with amazement. "Why did you say nothing about it in your telegram? I have not the pleasure either of Mr or Mrs Hartwright's acquaintance, and I certainly have no intention of forcing myself upon them as their guest. I supposed you had some sort of diggings of your own here, or I should never have accepted your invitation. It is not fair of you, and, I must say, not like you," he continued, rather angrily, "to place me in this false position."

"My dear boy, the whole situation is so strange that I could not explain it in a telegram of twenty words. That's the worst of telegrams; they are always putting people into false positions — particularly statesmen and diplomats—even although they have ciphers to help them out of them. I confined myself to the literal truth; it was Miss Masollam invited you, not my uncle."

"Well, but I can't be Miss Masollam's guest."

"I don't know that; I rather fancy you are."

"What! in your uncle's house?"

"As far as I can gather from my cousin Florence, who has been employing her afternoon in dexterously extracting the facts of the case from her father and mother, and receiving the confidence of the fair Asiatic, old Masollam seems to have hired The Turrets from my uncle, and insists upon the whole family remaining in it as his guests. This makes Miss Masollam mistress of the house, and I suppose she invites whom she pleases."

Reginald glanced at his friend to see whether he was serious.

"Oh, there's an old Masollam, is there?" he said at length. "I never heard of him before."

"If you will apologise for saying that I have placed you in a false position, and express your gratitude to me instead for having placed you in a position which is as romantic as it must be gratifying to any well-constituted mind, I will tell you a great deal more that you never heard of before, in regard to which I desire your sapient counsel and advice. We have nearly two hours before us, which will give me plenty of time to prime you. There is no necessity for you to see any

of the party till you meet them before dinner, more especially as you know your hostess already."

"I apologise; but I shall reserve my expressions of gratitude until you have unbosomed yourself. Go on; I am all attention."

Sebastian's narrative was only interrupted by their arrival at The Turrets. The friends slipped unobserved into the house, when he resumed it in his own room, to the great interest of Reginald, who pondered for some time in silence when it was concluded.

"Am I to understand," asked the latter at length, "that you wish, as it were, to take me into the family counsel?"

"Only so far as I am personally concerned. It is not necessary that any of its other members should know of your being in my confidence."

"By any of its other members you don't mean to exclude your cousin Florence, I suppose, as, from your account, she is the only one who has consulted you on the subject?" and Reginald favoured his friend with a shrewd glance. "To be of any use I must be in full pos-

session of the facts," he added. "That must be my excuse for asking you what relations exist between yourself and your cousin."

Sebastian hesitated a moment.

"It has always been the desire both of my uncle and aunt that we should marry; but my father was strongly opposed to the match."

"And you did not care about it?"

"No; I did not wish to oppose my father's wishes."

"But the young lady, being dutiful, was willing to obey hers, no doubt," said Clareville, with a smile. "Well, I won't press the point," he added, as he observed a shade of embarrassment in his friend's countenance, which was a sufficient answer to his question. "Now in regard to the nature of the financial assistance which Masollam has rendered to Mr Hartwright, your cousin only assumes this to be the case, and therefore is quite ignorant of the amount."

"Quite," replied Sebastian.

"What impression does Masollam make upon you?"

"I am bound to say a most agreeable one. He is extremely intelligent, full of the most

varied information, which he imparts in a manner at once original and attractive. Florence described him to me as a terrible old man, for whom she has conceived the strongest antipathy. To me, on the contrary, he is one of the most engaging specimens of humanity I have ever met."

"And you feel the same, no doubt, about his daughter?"

"I don't feel anything at all about her yet. I admire her as I would a beautiful picture; but I am not especially attracted to her as a human being. She seems to me a far more puzzling and less satisfactory individual than her father."

"Puzzling and unsatisfactory certainly, but to me she is eminently attractive; however, perhaps that is because I am not under the spell of the father," laughed Clareville. "Now let us formulate our ideas a little. First, we must find out who these people are, and where they come from. Secondly, what the man's motive is, not merely in lending your uncle money—that may be explained by the rate of interest he asks — but in suddenly establishing himself in his house under such peculiar

conditions. Thirdly, it behoves us to get at the bottom of his relations with the curiosity-dealer, and the woman he seems to keep in his house as a prisoner. And, fourthly, it may aid in the elucidation of matters if we can discover who this mysterious female may be. No man has a right to keep a fellow-creature in solitary confinement in this country. We might invoke the arm of the law."

"Don't you think for the present it will be better to invoke the aid of the cook?" said Sebastian. "It may do more harm than good to act openly before we know exactly how the case stands. The woman may be a voluntary recluse, or partially insane."

"I don't much like the cook feature in the affair," observed Reginald; "it savours a good deal more of the detective than of the gentleman; but perhaps as an act of humanity it may be justified. It is not in the interests of your family, but of this poor unknown woman, that I consent to it."

"And it was only in her interests that I arranged it," replied Sebastian; "but I am afraid we shall have to do detective work ourselves, or employ detectives to do it for us,

if we are to find out who the Masollams are. I thought of writing and putting them on Miss Masollam's track at the Grand Hotel."

"No, don't do that," said Reginald, quickly.

"Well, suggest something else."

Clareville remained lost in thought for some moments.

"By the way," he exclaimed, suddenly, "there is that strange friend of yours that you once introduced me to in Paris, when you wanted to drag me into those psychical investigations which seem to me as unprofitable as they are fascinating to weak minds. I beg your pardon, old man, I don't include you. If, as your cousin says, this Oriental sets up as a sort of necromancer, they are sure to know something of each other. All fellows in that line are either in league together, and then they play into each other's hands, or else they are rivals, and hate each other. What was your friend's name, again?"

"Santalba; but you are entirely mistaken if you suppose that he is either in league or in rivalry with any necromancer. I know no man who more thoroughly despises charlatanism of every description, or who possesses a

higher sense of honour. Nor have I been able to perceive any signs of it in Masollam, though he is evidently a man whose higher gifts and faculties have been remarkably developed. It was this about him which attracted me; and now that you mention it, I do see a strong resemblance in many points between their views, even during the short conversation which I have already had with Masollam on those subjects in which I feel a special interest. It is just possible, as you say, that they may know each other, though, if so, it is strange that I have never heard Santalba mention his name; however, I will write at once and ask him."

"Not so fast. Don't let us show more of our hand than we can help, even to the chivalrous and high-minded Santalba. First find out, if you can, from your uncle, how he came to know Masollam. Somebody must have introduced him, you know. And if you fail there, you can tell Masollam himself how like his views are to those of your friend, and draw him that way. It will be time enough to write when we know our ground a little better."

Mrs Hartwright's feelings of satisfaction at having the Honourable Reginald Clareville under her roof were somewhat damped, when, after he had been duly presented to her and the rest of the assembled company, with the exception of Amina, who greeted him with unembarrassed cordiality as an old acquaintance, Masollam offered her his arm when dinner was announced; and turning with the calm assurance of a host to Reginald, said, "Mr Clareville, will you take my daughter into dinner?" Charles Hartwright bit his lip; Florence linked her arm to that of her cousin Sebastian, with a comfortable sense of relief; and Mrs Hartwright, as she glanced at her companion, began to doubt whether, after all, she understood him so thoroughly as she supposed—doubts which were speedily set at rest by the profusion of compliments and pretty speeches with which the bland Oriental proceeded to overwhelm her.

"It was very kind of you," said Miss Masollam in French, in which language she was more at ease than in English, and speaking in a subdued tone, "to come to us in the midst of this political crisis, when I am sure

your parliamentary prospects must be absorbing all your time and thoughts."

"You are mistaken, Miss Masollam," Reginald replied, with a more serious manner than that which had characterised their first meeting in London. "I made no sacrifice in accepting your kind invitation; for I had just taken the most serious resolution of my life when Sebastian's telegram reached me."

She looked up at him with a glance of surprise and inquiry.

"I will tell you what it is," he continued, as though in answer to it; "I have made up my mind to abandon political life entirely."

"Now! at the most critical juncture of your country's fortunes!" she exclaimed; "at the moment when every true patriot with the influence and talents which you command, should devote himself to its service!"

"It is just because my country is likely soon to need my services, that I decline to devote myself any longer exclusively to the service of my party. I have done that too long already," he added, bitterly.

She watched him intently as he spoke.

"Explain to me," she said; "I am so igno-

rant of English ways. I thought that the difference between despotic government and free government was, that in one the king or emperor governed through his minister; and in the other, the people governed through a party. That is called constitutional government, or government by party; is it not so?"

This was not a very sentimental speech for a young lady to make, yet it went straighter to Clareville's heart than the most tender of glances, or the most significant of pressures. Thus are some men constituted, if the girls only knew it. There was nothing original in the definition, which was a very elementary one, philosophically speaking, nor in the form of its expression; but it seemed to touch a chord in Reginald's nature which was at that moment peculiarly sensitive, because it was still vibrating with the shock of the political agitation of pending events, and it seemed to convey to him an assurance of intellectual appreciation on the part of the speaker, of subjects in which he was most deeply interested, and of a faculty of sympathy which would warrant his discussing them with her. One of his chief reasons for responding so

promptly to Sebastian's telegram, was to talk over with him more fully than had yet been possible, the condition of public affairs, and his own position with regard to them. In Sebastian he knew he should find a sympathetic counsellor and confidant; but now in the very thrill of the tones he was listening to, he heard, as it were, the promise of a tenderer sympathy, of a loftier inspiration, than he could hope for even from a friend whom he esteemed above other men. He instinctively looked across the table at Sebastian as this thought flashed upon him, and could scarcely restrain a feeling of annoyance at perceiving how completely his attention was absorbed by the prattle of his cousin Florence.

Miss Masollam's glance had followed Reginald's.

"Perhaps you think that these are not subjects for women to discuss," she said, in a low and somewhat diffident tone.

"Pardon me,'" said Reginald, with a slight start, as he recovered himself from his momentary abstraction; "I was thinking exactly the opposite, and congratulating myself on having

found one with whom I can discuss them. Your definition of the difference between autocratic and constitutional, or rather responsible government—for there are countries which have constitutions without the government being responsible to the country, as it is in England—is substantially correct. Unfortunately, in politics as in religion, people attach too much importance to the form, and too little to the essence. It is the 'letter that killeth, the spirit that giveth life.' The worst form of government theoretically, becomes the best if all the administrative units are actuated by pure and high motives, and the best becomes the worst if these latter are dishonest and self-seeking; and when a political party, under what are called free institutions, becomes demoralised by private interests, internal dissensions, and inherent weakness, though it may not be corrupt in the worst sense of the word, the most precious liberties of the people are in greater danger than when they are in the hands of a single man who is patriotic, resolute, and free from the petty and personal ambitions which control the leaders of a party."

"Is it because both parties in England are

open to this charge that you wish to withdraw from politics?" asked Aminia.

"Not altogether; I was talking of the drawbacks which must ever attend the system of government by party in the abstract. I do not go so far as to assert that existing political parties in England are worse than their predecessors, or that one is much more sinning in these respects than the other, though it has been necessary for me to go through a parliamentary experience myself to realise the full extent of the evil; still, if that were all, it is possible, though it would probably be difficult—and, with the modifications which the electoral system is undergoing, is daily becoming more so—for me to take an independent position, and obey the dictates of my conscience, rather than those of any political leader; but then I should have the disagreeable sensation of knowing that if my example were followed by many, the government of the country would be rendered impossible. That consideration, however—which has reference to a hypothetical state of things, that in practice is not likely to arise—would not in itself be sufficient to drive me out of political life."

"What is the consideration which does, then?"

"The fact that the highest moral aspirations suggest political, social, and economic problems, which are insoluble in existing humanitary conditions, and one is therefore driven to the alternative either of violating one's noblest instincts, or of withdrawing from political and social life altogether. Common-sense, in the ordinary acceptation of the term, is sense of such a very common description that its exercise must ever bring one into sharp collision with the most lofty ethical ideal. A man may attempt it in private life, and in these civilised days he would be considered a harmless lunatic, and thus escape the fate of the greatest moral Teacher that ever lived; but common-sense in a statesman or politician demands that when the nation he governs is smitten on one cheek, it should instantly return the blow; that when occasion requires, its life-blood should be poured out like water in defence of its commercial interests—in other words, of that money which its preachers proclaim to be the root of evil. Common-

sense demands that it should be externally professing one thing theologically, and practising the exact opposite politically, socially, and economically. Common-sense demands, in fact, that it should live a lie, and the odd thing is that so few seem troubled by the inconsistency. Those that are, and who try to carry their convictions into public life, are impaled on the horns of a dilemma, and if they are honest, find only two courses open to them. Either they must repudiate the policy of common-sense, and adopt what, in default of a better definition, I will call the policy of Christ, which would inevitably result in the conquest and annexation of the country by some foreign Government with a common-sense policy; or by a cleverer adaptation of that policy than their neighbours, they must be more aggressive, more grasping, more self-seeking, more skilful and unscrupulous in the games of war and diplomacy, and thus by the exercise of the most unchristian qualities, secure that preponderance among other Powers, which is the only sure foundation for the national prosperity. Honesty is only the best policy for a nation or for an individual, in the

lowest and crudest acceptation of the term. That honesty which consists in being true to the highest moral ideal, is simply worldly ruin. The disasters which are in store for England, result not from her dishonesty, but from the well-meant endeavour of her statesmen to practise a higher political morality than is current among other nations. It is not lofty enough to appear insane—the world has not yet said of them that much goodness has made them mad ; but it is sufficiently opposed to common-sense to appear intensely feeble, sufficiently impulsive to seem flagrantly inconsistent, and, in fact, inconsistent enough to look distinctly hypocritical. If the conscience of the nation and its rulers were so quickened as to make their political practice consistent with their religious profession, they would certainly seem mad, and their end might be as tragic as that of their hero who died at Khartoum. But if one man by his death could leave such an imperishable moral legacy to posterity as he has done, what might not the death of a nation accomplish ? Who can say that the moral standard, which is now a mere abstraction, might not then

become a realisation? Meantime I cannot be a party to a policy based upon spasmodic moral impulses, so weak and fitful that they shrivel to nothing before the blast of public opinion, and so tempered to suit the exigencies of party warfare or private ambitions, that in some cases their very sincerity is dubious. I would rather go upon the old middle-age lines of expediency and so-called common-sense than this, and secure the material greatness of the empire by adopting the selfish and unscrupulous policy of jealousy and rivalry of each other pursued by our neighbours. Better to live by the force of greed, than die of the rottenness of cant. I decline, however, to be a party to a policy either of greed or of cant. These are the reasons, Miss Masollam, which have influenced me in retiring from the arena of politics."

"Entertaining these sentiments," said Amina, whose abstracted air indicated that she was endeavouring to estimate the force and value of these remarks, "I can quite understand that your right field of action is not in the sphere which causes you such acute moral suffering; but it does not follow that those whom you

condemn as weak and spasmodic in their impulses towards a higher standard of international political morality, could do otherwise for the moment than give the best expression to them which seems in their power. Nor, on the other hand, are those to be blamed who conscientiously believe that the prosperity of England can best be maintained by following those traditional lines of policy to which its greatness has been due, even though they may be out of harmony with those higher moral aspirations, the growing development of which is the marked characteristic of the age in which we live.'

"It does not the less seem to me the duty," replied Reginald, "for those who are the most conscious of this development, to protest alike against the moral feebleness of its half-hearted representatives who discredit it, and the moral denseness of those who resist it."

"On the contrary, it appears to me to be inconsistent with a truly philosophic attitude of mind to be dogmatic about motives of action or lines of policy, inasmuch as the sort of power required for political action implies necessarily a one-sided view. The character

of force needed for the coercion of men and events is not such as highly strung and sensitive natures possess, whose functions lie in another direction, and it must of necessity be somewhat coarse, and relatively even brutal in its attributes. The most powerful man now in Europe is an illustration of force of this description."

"He has created an empire, and developed the arrogance and cupidity of his race. I don't see that the interests of humanity, or of international morality have been much advanced thereby."

"Pardon me, if I differ from you there. We are not yet in a position to judge of the degree in which the results of his policy may not, in their ultimate influence, exercise a beneficial effect upon those interests. It must often happen that an individual, powerfully and instinctively impelled, by virtue of the force which he feels to be inherent in him, to act with energy upon the external forms of life, is bound to set aside many interests for the sake of one; but in the long-run these may not suffer thereby. No one is in a position to assert positively that they will. Take, for

instance, the leaders of the most divergent political ideas. They may be equally honest, equally desirous of their country's good, or even of the world's good; but as each one in advising a course of action builds upon the unknown quantity of the probable long chain of after-events, it becomes a mere matter of opinion which is good. Fortunately, in every stage of civilisation, by far the greater number of persons do not feel themselves called upon to face political problems with the breadth of view which produces in you the clear perception of the inconsistencies which render public life impossible to you. Opposing political parties have instincts just sufficiently broad to enable them to balance each other, and act without the sense of paralysis arising from the consciousness that they are grappling with problems incapable of solution. It is thus that the divine potency has ever worked through imperfect and often debased instruments, using first one side and then the other to correct the exaggerations of each; and thus from time to time does the rugged flint of popular revolution come in contact with the cold steel of military despotism. The shock

each time is terrible, but a spark of sacred fire has flashed from it into the world's darkness."

The eye of the fair speaker kindled with the enthusiasm of her utterance as she stopped abruptly; and Reginald felt that his growing admiration for her somewhat marred his critical faculty in argument.

"The spark immediately goes out," he said, with a smile.

"But often not before it has touched tinder," she answered quickly.

"And produced a disastrous conflagration," he rejoined. "We might each continue the metaphor to suit our own side of the question; but I cannot admit that progress is necessarily evolved by the clash of evil passions."

"It would not be if they were all evil, or those who roused them were animated only by selfish ends. But, in point of fact, political excesses are generally the result of an effort to remedy existing evils, and often to evoke virtues. It is the underlying motive which secures the ultimate benefit to humanity, by drawing down a divine influence into the world."

"Nay, now you are becoming mystical, and beg the question that there is such a thing as a 'divine influence,' of which I have no sort of proof."

"Why, you talked just now as if you were a Christian."

"I hope not. I said that the altruistic morality insisted upon by Christ should be practically and uncompromisingly applied to the policy of the nation; and I am not aware that any Christians have gone as far as that. They don't assert it, except theoretically, even of an individual. But there is nothing to prevent my being a materialist, and to my still according my complete adhesion to the ethical system taught by a Jew 1800 years ago."

"I am a materialist too," said Amina; "but that does not prevent my believing in a God, and in beings whom you may call angels, spirits, devils, or by any other name, because they happen to be invisible to you. It all depends upon what you mean by the word 'matter.' If you separate it from force of any kind, I deny its existence; if you do not separate it from force, you have no right to limit its existence to something conditioned on the

delicacy of your sense of touch, or the focus of your eye, or that of your microscope. The moment you admit that force cannot exist without a transmitting medium—which philosophically you must — matter is as good a name for that medium as any other; and the Deity, together with all the hosts of the peopled universes, and of those spiritual regions which are variously designated, become material. If you could only have the focus of your eye changed by a hair, you would find that matter, which is now invisible to it, is not so very different from that which is visible. But we have wandered from our subject, which was your political dilemma, and to which we had better not now return. Before we part, I will take care that you have a better proof than argument affords, of the existence of the region of invisible matter. I am the more surprised at your doubting it, because my friend Count Santalba, in Paris, told me that he knew you."

"I only saw him once, and know him too slightly to have entered upon any discussion with him; and," added Reginald, after a pause, "now I think of it, that may account

for the kind interest you manifested in me when we first met in the Ladies' Gallery of the House."

"Yes," she replied, simply, "it was from Santalba I first heard of you;" and then turning towards him, and fixing her large eyes upon his as she slowly rose, as the signal for the ladies to leave the table, she added, "and it is to him we owe our introduction to this house."

CHAPTER IX.

MINES AND COUNTERMINES.

THERE was a significance in the glance of Amina Masollam as she uttered the words which we have recorded in the concluding sentence of the last chapter, which was too marked to miss its effect upon a nature so sensitive as that of Reginald Clareville. "It was almost as though she had overheard our conversation," he said to Sebastian, as they smoked a cigarette together on the terrace before joining the ladies. "As much as to say, You need not resort to any such underhand means as you were proposing, to find out how we introduced ourselves here. Here is the answer to the question you want to ask, but do not dare. I read your distrust of us—but we scorn mystery."

"Scorn mystery, indeed," remarked Sebastian; "I should think they did. There was a cool and frank audacity in the way Masollam displaced uncle Charles from the head of his own table, in the presence of the assembled company, and a sublime indifference to the effect it was calculated to produce upon them, which fairly took my breath away. The old butler's face was a picture: did you see it?"

"No; I had only time for a hurried glance at your aunt's, who was rising to put her arm in mine, when I was suddenly ordered off to Miss Masollam: it also appeared an interesting study. Well, as he has taken such a decisive measure, evidently with a view of exciting our curiosity, he can have no objection to gratifying it, and it is no impertinence on your part, as a member of the family, in requesting him to do so. He seems to me to court inquiry."

"We shan't have long to wait—listen."

As the sash-door through which they had stepped out upon the terrace was standing open, the clear, resonant tones of the Oriental, which appeared pitched with design at a higher

key than was necessary, fell upon the stillness of the night.

"My dear Mr Hartwright," he was saying, "I think you have every reason to be satisfied with the promptitude and efficiency of your lawyer. He impresses me also as being a person of discretion ; and now that our little business affairs have been so satisfactorily concluded, I will ask you to excuse me, while I join our friends upon the terrace,"—and, suiting the action to the word — "This is a luxury your climate rarely affords you," he observed to Clareville. "Have you ever been in the East ?"

"No," replied Reginald.

"Then you don't know what nights are. Let us sit down on this bench : I sometimes feel so much older than I really am, and sometimes so much younger—curious, isn't it ? I have been feeling young nearly all day, and now I feel what I call an old fit coming on. That is why I must sit. You want to know who I am, why I have come and established myself here, and what is my motive for helping Mr Hartwright out of his difficulties. Is not that so? You see I come to the point at once."

The abruptness of this address did not disconcert the young men so much as it might have done, had their own previous conversation not in some measure prepared them for it.

"You have rightly anticipated," said Sebastian, "each of the questions which, as a relative of the family, the head of which is under financial obligations to me, I intended to take the earliest opportunity of asking—the more especially as I feel convinced that your motives in acting as you have done are not such as to need concealment."

"Pardon me, my dear Mr Hartwright," replied Masollam; "the present is not the earliest opportunity you have had of making these inquiries. We had a long talk yesterday upon other subjects, when you did not allude to them; but it is the earliest opportunity you have had since the arrival of your friend, and it is for his arrival that, like you, I have been waiting."

"I am not aware that I have any concern in the matter," said Clareville, who felt rather indignant at the somewhat uncalled-for snub which he thought Sebastian had received.

Masollam turned sharply on the speaker,

and his eyes seemed to gleam like points of fire in the darkness.

"What concerns your friend concerns you. At least that is his opinion, or he would not have waited to consult you before speaking to me; and you will allow me to add, my dear Mr Clareville, that when you say you have no concern in knowing who I am, and who my daughter is, you——well, you disappoint me: think it over now. Do you adhere to that statement?"

"I am not in the habit of making statements to which I can't adhere," said the other, hotly; for Masollam's politeness exasperated him. "I don't deny a certain curiosity, but I adhere to the assertion that it is no concern of mine."

Reginald afterwards told his friend that he seemed to have put out Masollam's eyes by this speech, the gleam in them vanished so suddenly.

"Well, well," he murmured in his far-off voice, "I have been a little premature: I did not come here to gratify an idle curiosity. I thought better of you, young man;" and he rose slowly, and with great apparent

effort, from the bench on which he had been sitting.

"But I am not asking from any idle curiosity," broke in Sebastian quickly, seeing that he was about to leave them.

"Let me lean upon your arm; I feel very weak. There—thanks! No, my son, I have no fault to find with you. I could have told you all had you asked me yesterday, but you invoked your friend. You appealed to Cæsar, and to Cæsar you must go. Still, I could have told him too, had he been different. That will do. Good night; I am going to my room: please ask my daughter to come to me there at once;"—and Masollam tottered into the house alone, and Sebastian returned perplexed and disappointed to his friend.

"You spoiled everything, Reginald: why could you not say that it did concern you to know who he and his daughter are?"

"Because I deny any man's right to tell me what to say. He is an old impostor, and she—is a witch, I think."

"Well, I must go and send her to her father, whatever she is;" and Sebastian hurried off, leaving his friend to chew the cud of his

reflections in a distinctly dissatisfied frame of mind. He was angry with himself, because, if Amina was what he had called her, he was a fool to have been bewitched by her. If she wasn't, he was a greater fool still not to have read her rightly. He had lost his heart, he felt sure of that now, to a woman of whom he had spoken disparagingly to his friend, and of whom he had declared to her own father—who would certainly repeat it to her—that it was no concern of his who or what she was,—that his only interest in her was one of mere idle curiosity. He had been promising himself a prolongation of their conversation in the drawing-room, and now it was he who had been the means of banishing her from it, probably for the rest of the evening.

"No doubt I told a lie," he muttered to himself, "when I said it was no concern of mine who she was; and it was that old brute with his glowing eyes and mocking manner who seemed to twist it out of me. It is a matter of supreme concern to me, on the contrary, who she is. Witch or angel, she is mine—ay, in spite of that detestable father-in-law. Florence Hartwright was right. He

is a terrible old man. I quite share her antipathy. He never had the slightest intention of telling us any of his secrets. He amused himself by taunting me, until he forced from me a denial of any interest in his daughter, and then dexterously used it to cover his retreat, and tell her about it before I should have time to see her again; and yet," he pondered, "considering I am not a bad match for an unknown Oriental, it is difficult to imagine what his game can be—unless, indeed," and he drew a long breath, as the full force of the revelation burst upon him,—"he destines her for Sebastian!"

Now it all became clear to him: it was a deep-laid plot of Masollam's to get the whole family completely into his power, and the price to be paid for their salvation from utter ruin would be Sebastian and his millions. The more he pieced his information together, the more it fitted into this hypothesis. "And this precious friend of Sebastian's at Paris," he continued mentally—"this Count Santalba, who is so honourable and disinterested, has contrived the whole conspiracy, and is doubtless to share the profits. Who

so well able to keep his accomplice informed of the exact situation, domestically and financially, of the Hartwright family; to influence his young and confiding friend, in his own interest and that of this Eastern adventurer? Who better acquainted with the relations existing between Sebastian and his cousin Florence, and the danger which may at any moment put an end to all their mercenary projects? How fortunate that Amina possesses no attraction for Sebastian! Now that I am on the track, this fair cousin and I become natural allies. She is not, perhaps, all that I could have wished in a wife for Sebastian, but she is certainly more refined than the rest of the family."

If these were not exactly the words in which Reginald formulated his reflections, this was the groove in which they ran, as he proceeded to evolve schemes for developing Florence's ladylike instincts, by having her invited to Clareville Court, to which place of refuge he proposed to carry off Sebastian, and where he doubted not, under the influence of his mother and sister, Florence would show to better advantage than amid the

coarser surroundings of her own family. He felt sure that a proposal of this kind would meet with the warmest approval of Mr and Mrs Hartwright, whom he also determined to put upon their guard, so soon as he could venture, upon such short acquaintance, to broach so delicate a subject.

He no sooner arrived at this conclusion, than he felt that he was losing valuable time in not joining the rest of the party, the more especially as Sebastian had remained with the ladies, and his own non-appearance among them might seem singular. The absence of the Masollams furthered his designs. Mr and Mrs Hartwright had once more assumed a temporary reign in their own establishment; and while Laura, who had musical talent of a high order to compensate for her other deficiencies, was relegated to the piano, and her brothers played *bezique*, and Florence and Sebastian seemed confidentially engaged in a corner of the room, Clareville was enabled to devote himself exclusively to the two elders of the family, who had been burning for an opportunity, thus most unexpectedly afforded them, of giving such an ex-

planation of the anomalous condition of the household as should save their own dignity, and satisfy the natural curiosity of the visitor, whom they could not call their guest. This they were the better able to do, as the events of the evening had determined them to arrive at a sudden resolution; for once husband and wife had jumped absolutely at the same conclusion, which they had communicated to each other when Miss Masollam's departure from the room afforded them an opportunity of doing so.

"I must apologise, Mr Clareville," said Charles Hartwright, "for not receiving you as a guest in my own house. I assure you, when my nephew despatched his telegram of invitation, I had every intention of doing so, as, although I was in the act of letting my house to Mr Masollam, I did not intend to conclude the arrangement until your visit had terminated. He, however, made it a condition at the last moment that it must either be done at once or not at all; and as we were already packed up to go abroad, and could not afford a second time to lose a tenant after every arrangement for our departure had been made,

I was obliged to consent. But as we intend to leave the day after to-morrow, he might at least have had the decency not to assume the duties of host until I had left."

"We must not be too hard upon Orientals, you know, who are quite unfamiliar with our ways," broke in Mrs Hartwright, who still had a lingering weakness for Masollam. "I assure you he was quite surprised when I hinted to him that he had placed us in a false position relatively to our guest—for we intended you to be our guest, you know, Mr Clareville; and he assured me that if he had had the least idea that it would have caused my husband any annoyance—and I was obliged to admit that it did—he never would have usurped your position, Charles. He said that he did it purely out of consideration for you, thinking you would be the last man to wish to appear in any house in a position to which you were not legally entitled, and the lease had already been signed. I then felt, that although, no doubt, it was unintentional on his part, he was placing you in a false position,—I did not so much care about myself,—and it was with great regret that we have decided

not to postpone our departure, as we shall leave you behind in our own house, Mr Clareville; where, as I have often told Sebastian, while we were masters of it, that we should have been so glad to receive you."

"You are very kind, Mrs Hartwright," said Reginald; "but I really hope you will reconsider your determination, now that I quite understand the situation, and agree with Mr Hartwright that it was one in which Mr Masollam had no right to place him: surely to delay your trip for a few days will make no difference. I hope under the circumstances you will not think I am presuming on a very short acquaintance—the more especially as Mr Masollam is, so far as I can learn from Sebastian, an entire stranger to you—if I venture to suggest that his motive in forcing this lease upon you so suddenly, and behaving as he has done since, was to drive you to adopt the very decision at which you have arrived. In other words, you are playing his game."

"What is his game?" asked Hartwright. Clareville made no immediate reply, but looked up as though accidentally, and let his glance rest upon the corner in which Sebas-

tian and his cousin were ensconced. Charles Hartwright's eyes instinctively followed Reginald's. He was a man of too hot a temper, and had been too much outraged in his pride, to remember that his departure would have precisely the opposite effect upon the fortunes of his daughter from that which Masollam had agreed to co-operate with him in achieving. He saw that he had been duped. And Clareville judiciously allowed this consciousness to work.

"Your own sagacity and knowledge of all the circumstances are so much greater than mine, Mr Hartwright," he said at length, "that I cannot venture on any suggestion which will not probably have occurred to yourself. In fact, as an entire stranger, I have already, perhaps, said too much. I can only excuse myself on the ground of my affection for your nephew, and my fear lest he should be ensnared in toils set by unscrupulous adventurers to entrap him and his fortune."

"I appreciate the kindness of your motives, my dear sir," rejoined Hartwright, "and beg to assure you that, so far from taking any offence

at any interest you may take in my family affairs, I shall, on the contrary, feel highly honoured by it. At the same time, your suggestion of prolonging our visit here, the force of which I fully recognise, is one which I cannot bring myself to entertain: the atmosphere of this house, or rather of its present master, has become absolutely intolerable to me. I confess to rather a violent temper, Mr Clareville, and I assure you that there are times when I can scarcely keep my hands off the old scoundrel. I really cannot trust myself to stay a moment longer under this roof than is absolutely necessary."

"I think it a pity that your whole family should be carried off to the Continent when they have friends here who, I know, would regret their departure," said Clareville. "Do they all know of your determination to leave England so soon?"

"Only Florence," said Mrs Hartwright. "I have not had an opportunity of telling the others: besides, she is the only one that matters."

"And what did she say?"

"Oh, she is in despair. She is too proud

to say anything, but I know it, and you can doubtless guess why,"—and this time it was Mrs Hartwright whose eyes rested on the corner, and Reginald whose glance followed hers.

"I am thinking of carrying off Sebastian with me when I leave this, to pay a visit to my people at Clareville Court: you know he is a frequent guest there, and a great favourite of my father's."

Neither of the Hartwrights could imagine what this remark was leading up to, so Mrs Hartwright discreetly confined herself to saying—

"That will be very nice for him."

"I was thinking whether I could not even make it nicer. He and his cousin seem such great friends, I am sure it would add to the pleasure of his stay if she were with us. Do you think if Lady Clareville invited Miss Hartwright to pay us a visit at Clareville Court, she could be prevailed upon to accept?"

"Politeness would require that the mother at least should be included," thought Reginald, "but that we really could not stand."

Whatever may have been Mrs Hartwright's thoughts upon that subject, she was too much

flattered and gratified by the proposal to allow them expression, while her husband's eyes sparkled with triumph.

"Both Mrs Hartwright and I feel only too much honoured by the proposal," he began; when, in order to stop any further protestations, Reginald rose, saying—

"Then I will go and make it to the young lady herself."

"We shall catch that old fox in his own trap yet," continued Hartwright to his wife, when Reginald was out of hearing. "He never would have gulled me with his fantastic assumption of magic, or whatever he calls 'his peculiar gifts,' had it not been for that letter of Santalba's. The Count's participation in the conspiracy to marry Sebastian to that girl—for that, I suppose, is what it amounts to—does, I confess, completely baffle me. Of all men that I have ever known, he, a friend of twenty years, is the one on whose profound knowledge of men and high sense of honour I thought I could the most implicitly rely, and yet he must now either be the dupe or the accomplice of this adventurer."

"I always tell you, my dear, that you men

never understand one another. I don't exactly know what you mean by the term 'adventurer.' We are all adventurers in a sense, but I have always thought that your friend Santalba was a sort of mixture of a fool and a rogue."

"Well, I shall certainly go first to Paris and make him explain his extraordinary conduct."

If Charles Hartwright could have availed himself of the facilities enjoyed by an author, to witness what was transpiring in Mr Masollam's room just then, he would have had occasion to modify that determination. This is what he would have seen. Stretched at full length on the couch, with a face furrowed with lines of deep suffering, and with drops of perspiration standing in beads upon his brow, lay Masollam; while standing near him, and holding in his hand a telegram, was a young man in a capacious ulster, the folds of which concealed his figure nearly to his feet, and whose heavy black moustache and beard covered the lower part of his face. And this is what he would have heard.

"Dear child, it cuts me to the heart to send you out in such a guise, on such a fatiguing

errand, at such an hour of the night; but you know that combinations made in the invisible can only be met by a promptitude corresponding to their rapidity of change. The moment I came into full sensitiveness to Reginald Clareville, I perceived that it would be impossible for us to go through with this struggle without help, and that Santalba and your mother must manage to get here by to-morrow night at latest, by the same train that we did. This can only be done by the immediate despatch of a telegram, the address of which must be unknown to any one in this house: there is no one but you to take it; and to ensure this secrecy, there is no alternative but for you to go on foot. That was why, to save time, I told you to dress while I wrote the telegram: now you have the explanation of the cipher it contains. I will sit up for you and let you in; how long will it be before you are back?"

"What o'clock is it now, father?" asked the girl, in a voice slightly muffled by the heavy moustache from behind which it issued.

"A quarter past eleven."

"And it is five miles there and back. I

shall hire a fly back as far as the lodge-gate, which is never locked. I can slip through unobserved. I shall not be much after half-past twelve."

"Have you got your little revolver?"

"Yes."

"Well, follow me, in case any one sees us: the servants will have to get accustomed to my habit of letting any one I choose in and out of my own house at all hours of the day or night." And the pair glided stealthily from the room.

CHAPTER X.

THE PLOT AT THE TURRETS THICKENS.

The following day passed uneventfully at The Turrets. There was a general sense of a strained situation all round, which seemed to impose a certain reserve even upon the most thoughtless and youthful members of the Hartwright family. Masollam had sent word by Amina that he was unable to leave his room in consequence of what he called his "attack" on the previous evening. "Attack of what?" Charles Hartwright had asked, with a very perceptible sneer.

"I think the doctors would call it an attack of the nerves," replied Amina; and Hartwright felt that his sneer was returned with interest.

The announcement which he thereupon made

that he had arrived at the determination of leaving The Turrets on the following morning early, with his wife and family, was received by Miss Masollam with one of those conventional expressions of regret, the hollowness of which she was at no pains to conceal. In fact, Florence told Sebastian afterwards that it seemed rather to afford her satisfaction than otherwise. That young lady herself was in the seventh heaven of delight, for Reginald had shown her the letter he had written and despatched to his mother by the first post, telling her to address the answer to his own lodging in London, where Sebastian, who had agreed to accompany the family to town, was to call for it; and as Clareville Court was only a couple of hours from London, he was to accompany his cousin there as soon as the day of the visit was fixed, after which the remainder of the family were to prosecute their journey to the Continent. It had not been without difficulty that Clareville had induced Sebastian to consent to this arrangement, as the latter felt that he was abandoning an investigation which, in the interests of his uncle's family and of the unknown prisoner at Carabet's, for

whom he was haunted by a strange feeling of sympathy, he felt bound to prosecute; but, as Reginald had pointed out, now that the mystery of Masollam's introduction was removed, and Santalba was a man, in his friend's judgment, above suspicion, there was no longer any immediate hurry. Santalba's character was a guarantee for the Masollams and for all their acts. That, although it was very far from being the opinion of Reginald, was a point upon which his friend continued firmly to insist; and, for the moment, it chimed in too well with Reginald's plans for him to wish to controvert it.

"Miss Masollam has expressed her hope that I should continue to consider myself her guest for a few days longer," he continued, "and this will give me an opportunity of prosecuting those researches in which you are so interested, and which seem to affect so nearly the fortunes of your family, under more favourable circumstances than you could have done."

"And also," added Sebastian, with a laugh, "of prosecuting that farther investigation, in which, I am aware, you feel no concern, as to who Miss Masollam is."

"I admitted a lively curiosity in the matter," rejoined Reginald, "and I do not deny that the general strangeness of the situation is one of sufficient interest to tempt me to stay a few days longer."

The fact was that, before Reginald had this conversation with Sebastian, he had already passed a very pleasant quiet hour, under the remote tree already alluded to, with Amina, and had fallen more deeply than ever under the charm of her intellectual gifts and uncommon beauty.

"Is Mr Sebastian Hartwright going to leave to-morrow with the rest of the family?" she had asked; and Reginald had replied that his friend's plans were not absolutely decided, but that he believed it to be highly probable. Then she had raised her eyes to his in a dreamy way, and said simply—

"And you?"

And Reginald had answered that he would leave it for her to decide what he was to do. And she had unhesitatingly replied, "There are many reasons why I think you had better stay." But when he tried gently to lead her on to talk of herself and her own past life, in

his endeavour to solve the mystery of her high mental attainments, and familiarity with those social and speculative questions by which his own mind was occupied, she had said, with a marked emphasis which convinced him that her father had repeated to her his unlucky remark of the previous evening, "You must let me choose my own time for satisfying your curiosity;" and after a pause she added—as the result apparently of an after-thought—"and method of doing it." And then, without giving Reginald time to excuse himself, she had turned the conversation upon those topics which she knew would be of the deepest interest to her listener, who, as he wondered at the breadth and originality of her views, felt more and more conscious that he had no alternative left to him but to worship blindly at her shrine, and to trust to time and opportunity to reveal its mysteries.

Charles Hartwright was the only member of the party who was thoroughly out of temper. In the first place, he could not disguise from himself the fact that he had been duped by a stranger, who had wormed himself into his confidence and then betrayed it—who had in-

sulted him in his own house, and who now, by shutting himself up in his own room, and refusing to see him when he had requested an interview, had deprived him of the opportunity of venting his indignation in words, and of giving Masollam what he called "a piece of his mind." The fact that he had resolved to pour out the vials of his wrath upon Santalba in Paris, was small consolation; for in doing so he was depriving himself of the one man upon whose advice and knowledge of financial men and affairs he had most relied for assistance —so much so, that every time he thought of his coming interview with his former friend his resolution wavered. When he had told his wife that one of his reasons for first going to Paris was, "to take that traitor, Santalba, roundly to task," she had said, "Pooh, my dear! you will do no such thing. I understand you better than you do yourself. If he has done you an injury, you can give him a gentle hint to that effect, and tell him that you expect some reparation for it. That will be a far wiser course than bursting out upon him the moment you see him. If he does nothing for us, it will be time enough for you to go and insult

him." Thus did Mrs Hartwright combine a good deal of the wisdom of the serpent with the cackle of the goose; and as her husband's experience had taught him that her judgment was better than his when he happened to be in a passion, he swallowed his indignation without further remark, and sat down to pour out his spleen in a letter to Masollam, which he would leave behind to be handed to that gentleman. But it happened in the case of Charles Hartwright, as it so often does with persons of violent passions and hasty impulses, that he occasionally formed plans and even took measures based upon the anticipation of hypothetical conditions which were destined never to arise. That evening when the party were assembled for dinner, and Miss Masollam appeared a few minutes late, she took Hartwright's arm, saying, as she did so, in English, in those soft clear tones which were nevertheless audible to the whole company—

"I must ask you to take me to dinner, Mr Hartwright. Poor papa! he is still too tired to come down. He begs you will excuse him; and now, instead of going to bed, he must sit up till twelve o'clock. He has just heard that

mamma will arrive to night—she will bring with her Count Santalba."

Thus did Miss Masollam explode her second shell in the midst of the Hartwright family —and then, without allowing time for more than a rapid exchange of bewildered glances between the persons most interested in this piece of startling intelligence, she marshalled the party in to dinner.

Hartwright was too dumfoundered to say anything. "Confound it!" he muttered internally, "this disarranges all my plans. I suppose I must stay here now to meet him;" and the considerations which ensued upon this reflection reduced him to silence, as he contemplated an interview with Santalba, at which Masollam would certainly be present, and when the task of calling on them together to account for their conduct towards him, presented a prospect which gave rise to a variety of conflicting conjectures and emotions.

"I suspect this will upset Florence's little apple-cart," said Laura, who was bringing up the rear with one of her brothers, expressing her sentiments in language especially adapted to that young man's comprehension. "I should

not wonder if she was done altogether out of that visit to Clareville Court, upon which she has set her heart."

And indeed her sister was at the same moment whispering to her cousin, "Was there ever anything so unfortunate? I am sure papa will give up his idea of starting to-morrow, as I know one of his reasons for going to Paris was to see the Count, whose arrival here at such a moment may give an entirely new turn to all our plans."

"So there's a mamma, is there?" murmured Reginald Clareville to Mrs Hartwright; "that is quite a new feature in the domestic arrangements of the Masollam family. The plot is decidedly thickening; she may be what in modern parlance is called 'an important factor' in it." And this reflection threw him into a reverie as to the influence which the presence of this hitherto unknown quantity might exercise upon his own hopes and prospects.

"This is very sudden news," said Charles Hartwright at last, in his abrupt and somewhat coarse way, to Miss Masollam. "You did not tell us before that your mother was alive,

and that you expected her arrival so soon with Santalba ? "

"Didn't I ? " replied Amina, looking up calmly into his face—and then seeing it growing purple with suppressed anger at her coolness, she added, "I suppose papa forgot to ask me to tell it to you till just now ; had he been well enough to see you, he probably would have told you before. I know he felt sure you would be glad to hear it, as it may save you a journey to Paris. If you will give us the pleasure of your company here for a few days longer, papa told me to say to you that the Count will tell you many interesting things that he is not well and strong enough to talk about himself."

"Of course, Charles," said Mrs Hartwright across the table, "we shall give up all idea of starting to-morrow. I should so like to make Mrs Masollam's acquaintance."

"You can do that and still start to-morrow," gruffly responded her husband. "However, I have done with plan-making, and shall be guided by circumstances after I have seen Santalba."

And so the matter rested for the present.

Soon after dinner, Amina, with many apologies, withdrew to her father's room, saying, as she did so, that Mr Masollam had given orders that the new arrivals were to be shown up at once to his own apartments, so as to avoid the necessity of any of his friends putting themselves to the inconvenience of sitting up for them. As this was regarded as a polite intimation on the part of the master of the house that he did not intend to gratify any idle curiosity that night, and as everybody present was bursting with a private commentary on this new phase of affairs, which would not bear public discussion, the party broke up at an earlier hour than usual.

It had scarcely struck midnight when the various couples who were engaged in different parts of the house interchanging the views suggested by the sudden and unexpected arrival of Mrs Masollam and Count Santalba, were interrupted by the rumble of a carriage, for which they had been listening for some minutes past, upon the gravel approach leading to The Turrets. Ned Hartwright, who had been sent by Laura

on a reconnoitring expedition, was looking through the chink of a slightly opened door, leading from a passage into the entrance-hall; and this was what he saw: First, Miss Masollam, who appeared almost at the first sound of the bell, and who was immediately afterwards joined by Mr Sharp the butler, who, on opening the front door, gave ingress, to Ned's surprise, to Carabet, the curiosity-dealer, whose shop the youth had occasionally visited when in search of oriental trinkets to serve as presents to the fair objects of his fleeting affections. Carabet, with every demonstration of respect, proceeded to help out of the carriage a very upright and stately lady of rather over the middle age, with very black piercing eyes, an unusually dark complexion, very regular features, and the traces of great beauty, adorned with more jewellery than generally befits a travelling costume, about which there was nothing uncommon but the head-dress, which consisted of a handkerchief almost as large as a small shawl, of rich silk, fringed with long tassels of twisted silk and gold, and which was pinned closely under her chin.

Amina threw herself into this lady's arms, and Ned's indignation was excited by the coldness with which the salute on both Mrs Masollam's cheeks was returned by that lady, when he thought how differently he would have acted had he been in her place. She was followed by a middle-aged man, slightly below the average height, with iron-grey hair cropped very short, mild blue eyes, a black moustache, aquiline features, small hands and feet, and a general air of distinction which did not need the assistance of a tailor to assert itself, though Ned, with the eye of a connoisseur, pronounced the fit of his travelling tweed suit perfect. When, to his amazement, this gentleman took Amina in his arms and kissed her with as much warmth as he would have done himself, Ned felt even more stirred to the depths than he had done before, and treasured this item of his observation as a piece of intelligence which he would withhold for the present, and impart to his sister Florence, or to Sebastian, or even to Reginald Clareville, according as opportunity might arise, and attendant circumstances might sug-

gest the effect to be produced by it. Carabet now humbly took his leave and retired. The butler led the way, followed with stately dignity by the old lady ; while the Count, holding Amina's hand, brought up the rear.

The only words uttered throughout was when Amina, speaking French, said to him, "We must be quick ; we have not a moment to lose." All which was duly reported to Laura, excepting the extremely affectionate terms upon which the Count appeared to be with Miss Masollam—and this would have been worth all the rest—which just shows how important it is for persons engaged in underhand operations of this sort, to have a spy upon whom they can absolutely rely. If Ned could have followed the party up to Masollam's room, as he longed to do, he would have had much more to report or to conceal, as his fancy or love of mischief might suggest. He would have seen Masollam stretched apparently upon a bed of sickness, and in such a condition of absolute prostration and exhaustion us to be unable to recognise the new-comers ; he would have seen

these latter, in active co-operation with his daughter, proceed to apply restoratives of which the medical profession have never dreamed; he would have seen the old man at length return to consciousness, and then, if he could have understood the language in which he spoke, he would have have heard him say strange things incomprehensible to him, but apparently pregnant with weighty meaning for those to whom they were addressed, and he would have been amazed at the rapidly returning indications of an inflowing of life and vigour, until at last, when the restoration was complete, he would have heard the old man tell his attendants to go and take some rest; and, immediately on their withdrawal, he would have seen him rise from his bed and dress, and take his hat, and let himself stealthily out, and go round to the stables and quietly saddle a horse, and ride quickly into town; and he would have seen him let himself into Carabet's house with a pass-key, and Carabet come out and walk the horse up and down for nearly an hour, to the great perplexity of the policeman on duty; and at

last he would have seen him emerge, mount, and ride home, and get into bed again just as the day was breaking. All this Ned missed, because he had not an invisible lamp, which would have thrown a flood of light upon the destiny of those whose fortunes in the tangled skein of life we are considering.

CHAPTER XI.

COUNT SANTALBA.

Mr Masollam never looked younger, stronger, or more thoroughly full of vigour than he did on the morning following the occurrences narrated in the last chapter, when he was among the first of those to assemble in the breakfast-room. He was followed soon after by Santalba and Sebastian, who had already been out together for a morning stroll. The former bowed somewhat distantly to Clareville, and greeted the rest of the party with the cordiality of an old acquaintance, not seeming to notice the cold and markedly rude manner of Charles Hartwright.

"Although I have not had the pleasure of seeing any of you since you were children," he said, turning to the younger members of the

family, "I have dandled you all by turns upon my knee; and you, Miss Hartwright, ought at least to remember me."

"I thought I should do so when I saw you, but I find I don't," replied Florence.

"Ah, I forgot, my hair was not grey then, and I wore a beard. It was part of my travelling costume in those days; but now that I have become a quiet stay-at-home person, it is an appendage with which I have dispensed."

At this moment Mrs Masollam entered with Amina, and was duly introduced by her husband to the assembled party.

Clareville was at once struck by the strong contrast she presented in every respect to her daughter. Not only was her complexion much darker, but her beauty must have been of a different and less refined type; whereas Amina's eyes were large and lustrous, and, except when they flashed with some unwonted excitement, were soft and beaming: her mother's, though not less bright, were smaller and more piercing; and Reginald fancied there was an expression of latent treachery and cruelty in them, which almost gave him a shudder. While in manner she possessed all the native dignity of

an Oriental, it was also essentially oriental in its manifestation. The ease and grace of a woman accustomed to society were entirely wanting. She maintained a coldness and indifference of attitude which seemed too nearly allied to contempt to be altogether polite. Possibly, thought Reginald, it is partly the result of reserve, arising from a consciousness of the absence of any social training. As he looked at her low narrow forehead, he doubted that her intellectual faculty was likely to be of a very high order; but the somewhat heavy chin, stern lines which age had worn at the corners of a remarkably well-cut mouth—the flexible nostril, with its upward curl, and the penetrating but covert glance — suggested a resolute and subtle nature, which it might be difficult to coerce, and dangerous to trifle with. It was evident, also, that she was far inferior to her daughter in linguistic acquirements. She knew no English, and only spoke a few words of French with difficulty. As, moreover, she was too proud to show her ignorance of it, she confined herself chiefly to monosyllables.

The result of his observation was to throw

Reginald into a reverie of despondency, which was slightly tinged with mortification, when, on looking suddenly up, he caught Amina's eye, and fancied he detected the faintest suspicion of a smile hovering about the corners of her mouth. "She is reading my thoughts as though they were an open book," he said to himself, as he withdrew his eyes quickly. "She may not be a witch ; but she certainly is an enchantress of a very dangerous sort ;" and he repressed the sigh which rose in his breast.

"My wife can't talk in any language which you can understand, my dear Mrs Hartwright," said Masollam ; "don't trouble yourself to try and make conversation. Indeed she is not a talkative person in any tongue ; that was the reason I married her. But she has a great gift"—and he glanced at Clareville as though bespeaking his attention—"which you, of all women, will appreciate, for you share it with her to a remarkable degree,—she thoroughly understands men."

Mrs Hartwright gave a little flutter of satisfaction, and turning to Mrs Masollam with a beaming smile, exclaimed, "Oh, then I am

sure we shall understand each other;" while Reginald felt that the remark had been aimed at him, and that he was still bearing the consequences of his unfortunate encounter with Mr Masollam two evenings before.

"I suppose you got her here to explain me to you," he felt strongly inclined to retort, but remembered that, under the circumstances, discretion was the better part of valour, the more especially as Mr Masollam was saying something to his wife in an unknown tongue, which Mrs Hartwright flattered herself was a translation of her last amiable remark, but which Reginald felt certain was an allusion to himself, as Madame Masollam, after listening to it, honoured him with a languid stare, and then proceeded to pick a bone of grilled chicken with her fingers.

"How in the world did such a mother ever come by such a daughter!" was Clareville's internal comment on this proceeding, when Santalba suddenly interrupted his gloomy reflections, and with the instinct of a well-bred man, who feels that the situation all round is painfully strained, created a diversion by launching into the field of politics,

which at this juncture, whether at home or abroad, afforded abundant material for conversation. Charles Hartwright alone was too much preoccupied with his own sullen ruminations to take part in it; and when, after breakfast, Masollam said, "My dear Mr Hartwright, I hope you will join Santalba and myself in my room; we have some affairs to talk over which will be of interest to you," he replied in a harsh tone, "With your permission, as I intend to leave by the afternoon train, I will first ask Count Santalba to favour me with a private interview for a few moments, after which I think everything that can be of interest to me will have been said; and as I shall have very little time left at my disposal, I shall ask you to excuse me from joining you as you propose."

Masollam shrugged his shoulders with an amiable smile. "Be it as you will," he said. "Santalba, I shall expect you when Mr Hartwright has done with you; and if he sees fit to change his plans once more, which I regret to think is now highly improbable, I shall be glad to see him too."

Hartwright led the way to the den which

he still called his own, followed by the Count, the imperturbable expression of benignant serenity which rested on the countenance of the latter, forming a marked contrast to the striking variations which were the characteristic of Masollam's every movement and play of feature. A close observer of Santalba's face, however, might have recognised that, underlying its extreme gentleness, there were indications of great moral power, and high intellectual capacity. If he had learnt to control the passions of his nature, there was in the deep blue of the calm reflective eye, in the massive forehead and somewhat projecting brow, a latent force, which was none the less there because it was held in complete subjection, and which perhaps asserted itself all the more powerfully over the natures with which it came into contact, because the organism in which it was stored bore a placid surface. Hartwright, though a dense man, so far as his own organic sensitiveness was concerned, was painfully conscious of this when he found himself alone with his former friend. The Count did not seem the same man that he was when he had seen him last—an indefinable

change had taken place, which made him feel ill at ease. In order not to be betrayed into an outburst of temper, he had been preparing some carefully weighed and cuttingly polite sentences by way of opening the interview, which, as he felt the influence of the benevolent and almost tender sympathy of Santalba's gaze, seemed singularly out of place. The latter perceived the momentary embarrassment, and laying his hand kindly on his shoulders, said, "You are in trouble, old friend, and, with an imperfect knowledge of the circumstances, are inclined to lay the blame on me. If you will assume, for the sake of argument, that you may have jumped to this conclusion upon insufficient data, perhaps you will find that I can explain everything satisfactorily. I would spare you the regret of feeling afterwards that you have formed needlessly, harsh and unjust judgments."

"If I have been induced to form harsh judgments," said Hartwright, "it is because they are supported by facts. I shall only be too glad to find that they are unjust. May I ask what was your motive in introducing Mr and Miss Masollam to me?"

"I sent him to you in answer to your letter to me asking for assistance in your financial difficulties. I understand he has afforded it to you."

"He has lent me some money, certainly, and I have now discovered his object in doing so, though when I asked him what it was at the time, he put me off with some grand phrases about its being an act of service to you; and as I believed I could trust you, I felt satisfied. Indeed I supposed, as he was such an utter stranger to me, that he was in some way commissioned by you to give me the money. I also asked him for advice and assistance in another matter, for, relying on that foolish passage in your letter about his goodness and his wonderful gifts, I took him into my entire confidence. Now I see that his loan was as treacherous as his advice."

"What was his advice?"

"It had reference to a marriage which I am trying to bring about between my nephew and my daughter Florence—of which he approved, and which he promised to use his gifts to accomplish."

"I think, if you will try and recall the

exact particulars of that interview, you will find that it is your memory that is treacherous, not his advice. See here," and Santalba drew a paper from his pocket, which, on perusing it, Hartwright found, to his surprise, contained a report as nearly as possible verbatim of what passed on the occasion of his first interview with Masollam. "My oriental friend," pursued Santalba, "is a very careful man, with a very tenacious memory; and it is his habit, after important conversations—such as the one under consideration — to record them for future reference, in case of such necessity as has now arisen. You will see he did not express approval of the marriage you desire, and that he carefully abstained from making any promise or offering any advice in regard to it."

"I don't deny the verbal accuracy of this report, but a man may imply a great deal in his manner without committing himself in words. He distinctly wished to produce the impression on my mind that he would use his gifts to further my views; look at his allusion to the love-philtre. It is now clear to me that the whole thing has been a plot from the

beginning, and that his object in coming here has been to marry his daughter to my nephew, and by getting me into his power financially, to avert the danger of my opposition."

"I should have supposed, had that been his object, that the easy thing would have been for him to wait till you and your family were safely abroad, and then he need neither have lent you money nor feared your opposition, for the field would have been free. You need have known nothing about it."

"Pardon me; had he not come just when he did, Sebastian, who arrived only a few hours later, would have been here alone; and Florence told me in confidence that she feels certain that her cousin was on the point of proposing to her, when he was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Miss Masollam at a carriage-window which passed at the moment. I have no moral doubt that had it not been for the most inopportune arrival of the Masollams, the marriage would have been arranged ere this. What other conclusion can I come to but that you, who know my nephew so well, and were aware of his father's objections to the match, got wind in some way of the

state of affairs?—perhaps through some of the peculiar gifts with which you and the whole Masollam family seem endowed," he added, with a sneer, "and were determined to thwart it for your own purposes. If Masollam can capture Sebastian's millions for his daughter, it will be certainly turning his gifts to good account; but I am surprised that you should be a party to such a conspiracy."

Santalba listened to this outburst with unruffled composure.

"I have been thinking," he said, after a pause, "how I could best convince you of the utter delusion into which you have fallen in regard to this whole matter. On the whole, after weighing what you have said, I have come to the conclusion—a very disagreeable one, I assure you—that it will be better for the present to leave you in it. Had you been a man of different temperament it would have been otherwise; I should have been able to take you partially into my confidence, and, as the result of it, you would no doubt have seen fit to postpone your departure, and to have listened to some further explanations which Mr Masol-

lam was prepared to give you. As it is, it would be useless my renewing his invitation that you should accompany me to his room."

"Quite," broke in Hartwright, fiercely.

"I supposed so, and do not mean to renew it. Meantime I am at liberty to tell you this much, that I have made arrangements with Sebastian to remain with us here, instead of going to pay his projected visit just now to Clareville Court to meet Miss Hartwright; so I am afraid the engagement upon which you have set your heart is not to take place yet, at all events."

Hartwright received this piece of intelligence with a display of temper and violence of language which, as Mrs Hartwright had predicted, rendered it impossible for him afterwards to appeal to the Count, had he so desired, for that assistance which he believed the latter was so well able to afford.

"I will trust to time to right me in your good opinion, Mr Hartwright," Santalba said, rising. "Meantime you will excuse me for terminating an interview which it will serve no purpose to prolong. As it is probable that you will now adhere to your intention

of leaving to-day, and I may not see you again, I desire, before we part, to say that, while I regret your violence, I do not resent it, and should even again offer to serve you, were I not assured that I should only expose myself to your further suspicion by doing so." And without waiting for Hartwright's reply, he left the room, and ascended to Masollam's apartment.

Hartwright went at once in search of his wife and daughter. The news of Sebastian's treachery, as he called it, blinded him to all considerations of policy, and his only thought was to lose no time in shaking the dust from off his feet against the whole party, who, to his excited imagination, seemed to have entered into a league to betray him. His fury was in no degree mitigated by the fact that he could not find those he sought. None of the servants had seen either of the ladies, and he searched high and low for them in vain. They had seen Mr Clareville and Mr Sebastian go out for a walk, but had not seen either Mrs Hartwright or Miss Florence since breakfast. The fact was, that at that moment those ladies were sitting with Miss Ma-

sollam under her favourite tree, having been carried off there by Amina, after she had exchanged a few words with Sebastian, who had in like manner, apparently in obedience to orders, gone off with Reginald in the opposite direction for a walk.

"I am so glad, Mrs Hartwright," Miss Masollam was saying, "that you and Miss Hartwright agree to my proposal. She must let me call her Florence, now that we are to live together. As soon as Mr Sebastian Hartwright told me that he had agreed to the Count's plan, provided I could induce Florence to stay, I felt that not a moment was to be lost in getting your consent. I had hoped that you would all have remained, but my father says that he is sure Mr Hartwright will not agree to that. I suppose there is no doubt that if he will not stay himself, he will allow Florence to remain as our guest?"

"I am not quite so sure of that, my dear," replied Mrs Hartwright. "Charles is a man of a peculiar temper—in fact I am the only person who ever understood him—and if I cannot persuade him nobody can. But you may be sure I will try, and I think I shall succeed,"

she added, with an assured little toss of her head. At this moment Hartwright's voice was heard bellowing the names of his wife and daughter in another part of the garden ; and Mrs Hartwright jumped up, saying, "Now, you two get back to the house as quickly as you can without meeting him, and let me manage him alone."

Mrs Hartwright's confidence was not misplaced. This turn of events was so different from what Hartwright had anticipated ; it was so difficult to perceive in it any confirmation of his suspicion, or to discover a trap, that beneath the sullen acquiescence which he at last yielded to the proposal, there lurked a mingled feeling of satisfaction and bewilderment, which had the effect of reducing him to a state of decent civility towards all those with whom he came in contact—indeed, when he heard of the stipulation which Sebastian had made as the condition of his own change of plan, he was forced reluctantly to doubt whether he might not have done his nephew an injustice.

Clareville was not so easily reconciled to the new proposition, which it had been Sebastian's

task to convey to him. He had very little faith in Florence's power of fascination, and a great deal in Amina's. "It is a mere blind," he thought. "Sebastian would not stay without Florence, and they saw that if I packed them both off to Clareville Court, and enlisted the sympathies of my mother and sister in the young couple's love-affairs, it would be fatal to their plans; so rather than risk it, and in order to avert suspicion, they have decided to take the far lesser danger of keeping Florence here, especially as they could not keep Sebastian without her. *Coûte que coûte*, they are bent on securing his money-bags, that is certain; the question is, will Amina be a party to the plot? That she can win Sebastian from Florence to herself the day she chooses, I know them all three now too well to doubt." This gave rise to a very painful series of reflections in Clareville's mind, all the more so because he could not confide them to his friend, to whom the dissatisfaction he manifested at the change seemed exaggerated and incomprehensible.

"It is very kind of you, old man," said Sebastian, "being so disappointed at our having to give up our visit to your people; but

it is only a postponement, you know. I will write to Lady Clareville and explain the circumstances as well as I can."

"You can't do that," said Reginald, "without giving the reasons which Count Santalba urged upon you to agree to the change of plan, and you have not told me yet what they were."

"The fact is," said Sebastian, with some embarrassment, "they are rather difficult to explain to an outsider. Santalba has, as you know, been the friend of my lifetime. He was the one man in the world my father loved and trusted above all others, and if I had not inherited the same sentiments towards him, my experience of his truth and goodness would have led me to acquire them. We have certain views of life in common, and I admit that, knowing the lofty motives by which he is governed, I often allow myself to be influenced by him, without requiring him to tell me all the reasons on which he bases his advice."

"Hum," grunted Clareville, in a disapproving and somewhat contemptuous manner. "I should have thought you were old enough not to be in leading-strings to any man."

"It is not a matter I can enter upon," replied Sebastian, shortly. "I am only in leading-strings because I like it, and because he is leading me where I want to go. You might as well say that you are in leading-strings to the Prime Minister when you vote the way he wants you."

"So I do, and that's just the reason I won't do it any longer."

"That is because he happens to have lost your confidence; but Santalba does not happen to have lost mine. When he does, I will follow your example. By the way, you have not told me what you think of him."

"I have not seen enough of him to judge definitely; but I am quite ready honestly to admit that, considering how prejudiced I was against him, I am surprised myself at the favourable impression he has made upon me."

Sebastian's eyes glistened with delight as he heard this confession.

"If for no other reason, I should have been a fool," he cried, with enthusiasm, "to leave the two best friends I have in the world, and whom it has been the desire of my life to bring together, for the sake of any girl. I

may tell you this much," he added, after a pause, "it is for your sake, and on your account, I am staying."

"And it is for your sake, and on your account, that your cousin Florence is staying, I suppose," rejoined Reginald. "It seems to me that if you don't marry her after this, you will be behaving badly."

"I might just as well say that it is for Miss Masollam's sake, and on her account, that you are staying, and that if you don't marry her after this, you will be behaving badly."

"It is by no means the same thing; however, I can neither fathom your motives nor force you to reconsider your decision. One thing is certain, that there is a mysterious game of some sort on foot, in which it seems to me I am getting involved with you, and which we neither of us understand. You admitted that when you telegraphed for me."

"Yes; but I did not then know that Santalba had a hand in it."

"Has it not occurred to you as a strange and suspicious circumstance, that although you have known Count Santalba all your life, he should never have informed you of the

existence of the Masollams, with whom he seems to have been in such close relations during all that time?"

"I knew that he had derived much of his remarkable knowledge and conversance with oriental subjects of a theological and mystical character from an Eastern sage, whom I have heard him allude to as 'the Master'; but I never heard his name, and when I have pressed him for fuller information on the subject, he answered that the day would come when, if I desired it, I should be initiated by the Master himself into these knowledges, but that at the time I asked for it, an introduction to him would be premature. You must remember that although I have known the Count all my life as being a friend of my father's, it is only since the death of the latter that I have been intimate with him, and since then his conduct towards me in carrying out my father's wishes in regard to his property, which for some reason that I could never understand he left away from me by will, has been so thoroughly honourable as to place him above all such unworthy suspicion as I see you entertain in regard to him."

" Is he married ? " asked Clareville.

" His wife died some years ago. I only remember as a child seeing her once ; but I have heard from my father that she was even a more remarkable person than he is. The Count himself rarely alludes to her, and then only in such terms of admiration and respect as amount almost to veneration."

" Had they any children ? "

" I remember once hearing him talk of a daughter who, I think, he said was then in a convent in Paris, but it was some years ago ; and as he has never mentioned her since, I have shrunk from all reference to her, thinking she might be dead."

The more Clareville pondered over the situation, as they walked for some time side by side in silence, the more completely perplexed did he become. He had a curious consciousness of being in the meshes of a net, which was stealthily and mysteriously enveloping him, without any apparent effort on the part of the agencies of which he was the victim. He looked back to the night when, after his conversation with Masollam, the whole conspiracy burst upon him like a revelation, and he had lost not a

moment in forming a plan which should defeat it. At the time, he had congratulated himself on the ingenuity and promptitude he had displayed in devising, in the course of a few hours, a method of removing Sebastian and his cousin from the danger of having their love-affairs interfered with, and of securing a fair field for himself; but in the very nick of time there suddenly appears upon the scene the only man in the world who had influence enough with his friend to upset the whole scheme, and form a new combination even more dangerous than that which he had destroyed. After what Sebastian had just said, and after what he had himself observed of Santalba, he felt convinced that the latter had only to use his influence with his friend to induce him to give up all thought of marriage with his cousin; but on the other hand, he further reflected that the Count's influence with Sebastian was so unbounded, that had he desired to see him married to Amina, with whom some mysterious tie apparently existed, it did not need all this intrigue and conspiracy to bring it about. Again, while he felt a most profound mistrust and suspicion of the Oriental and his wife, neither Count

Santalba nor Amina inspired him with the same sentiments; on the contrary, he found a difficulty in reconciling himself to the idea that they were either mercenary or treacherous —but this rendered the near relationship of the one and the intimacy of the other with the Masollams, and the apparent hearty co-operation and complicity of both in their designs, all the more inexplicable. Unable to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion, Reginald at last said abruptly, "Well, as it seems that there is nothing more to be said on the matter, suppose we turn homeward and see what is the last new development."

But it was not at The Turrets that this was to be looked for. Jane Slocum was in fact watching it through the keyhole of a room in the upper floor of the house inhabited by Mr Carabet, the curiosity-dealer.

CHAPTER XII.

A MIDNIGHT MYSTERY.

As the process of looking through a keyhole is doubtless one with which the reader is familiar, it is unnecessary for me here to expatiate at length on the various disadvantages attending this method of observation. Certainly one of its most fatal defects is the very limited area which is embraced in the range of vision. Not merely does this often prevent you from seeing anything interesting, but it exposes you to the danger of having the door suddenly opened by a person within approaching it from the side; and, knowing Mr Carabet's habits, it was this contingency that Jane most dreaded. The unusual circumstance, however, of a visitor to Mr Carabet's sister, had so piqued her curiosity that it induced her to incur this

serious risk ; and on seeing a strange, foreign-looking lady, who had first been shown into the first-floor front, emerge therefrom at the heels of the curiosity-dealer, and proceed to follow him up the narrow staircase, Jane, who had been watching from a post of observation below, slipped off her shoes, and nimbly tripped up in pursuit. It was not the first time she had applied her eye to the aperture at which it seemed now to be glued. And she had sufficiently often seen the solitary occupant of the room cross her field of vision to be familiar with her appearance. She was a short and rather stout woman, apparently about fifty years of age, or perhaps more, with large blue eyes, and a complexion which was somewhat too dark to match them ; in fact, it was this contrast between the colour of her eyes and that of her skin which appeared to Jane her most marked characteristic. Apart from this, there was nothing striking in her features, which, without being regular, would have been pleasing, were it not for an abiding expression of profound melancholy which seemed stamped upon them. Her dark-brown hair was confined in a sort of gauze kerchief wound about

her head, with an end hanging down her back, where the thin threads of gold with which it was interlaced did not escape the observation of the cook, nor did a heavy necklace of twisted silver, with bracelets of the same material, which even in her solitude the recluse appeared to cling to as ornaments. Her costume consisted of an under-garment which Jane described to Mary as a muslin night-gown, over which was a robe of red and yellow satin, open to the waist in front, and reaching to the ground; her feet were thrust into embroidered slippers. She seemed to prefer as a seat a low cushion to a chair; and she occupied herself on the various occasions when she had been watched, sometimes with embroidery, sometimes with weaving little mats of coloured straw, and sometimes with washing pieces of copper brought to her by Carabet, with a mixture, the nature of which remained a mystery. All that Jane could make out of her interview with her present visitor was that the latter was also seated on a cushion on the floor at her side, and speaking to her in an unknown tongue; but she was invisible from her point of observation, and so was Carabet.

That the communication was a painful one she gathered from the fact that, from time to time, the woman made gestures of despondency, while her low tones seemed those of supplication, and a tear-drop occasionally trembled on the fringe of her long dark lashes. The interview came to an end so suddenly that, had Jane not taken alarm at a movement of the chair upon which Carabet seemed to be sitting, she would have been caught *in flagrante delicto;* as it was, she effected her retreat in safety, and took another careful observation of the visitor, as, followed by Carabet, she got into the carriage, which had been waiting at the door. Jane Slocum's first impulse was to write at once to Sebastian, to appoint a meeting at the rendezvous agreed upon; but she afterwards reflected that some new development was occurring, and that she might have something more interesting to report by waiting twenty-four hours. The result proved the correctness of her calculations.

Immediately on his return from escorting the lady, Jane knew not whither, Mr Carabet sent for both his servants.

"You will be glad to know," he said, "that I have made arrangements with the lady who visited my sister to-day, and who is a relative of mine, to take her back to her own country. She will leave to-night by the mail; but as that does not arrive here till after midnight, I shall not expect either of you to sit up. I will take my sister to the station myself. I only mention it, because I know that you will be glad to hear that she will be more happily provided for than she could be while she remained with me, and that the objection you both felt to remaining in my service will be removed, while your work will be a little lighter."

"It was not the work I minded," said Jane; "it was a pleasure to cook her little bite for the poor lady. It was the keepin' of her shut up, as I objected to. I 'ates mistries. Will she be kep' a prisoner in her own country, sir?" she pursued, eager in quest of further information; but Mr Carabet was not to be drawn from the shell of his reserve.

"As I said before, there will be no occasion for your sitting up," and he went up-stairs to the second floor, ignoring Jane's last query.

"There will be just all the occasion in life for my sittin' up, Mr Carabet," she muttered after him, as she watched his retreating figure ; but she gained little by her vigilance. She heard the rumble of a fly a little after midnight, which stopped at Carabet's door. She saw that individual open it, and beckon in the coachman, who followed him up-stairs, and shouldered Miss Carabet's trunk. "His sister, indeed," whispered Jane to Mary, whose curiosity also prompted her to mar her night's rest. "I wonder whether she is his sister. She ain't a bit like him, and it's my belief she is a married woman. She's a deal better lookin' nor ever he was ; she 'as a reel nice face, and maybe when she was young it was a pretty one ; she's a regular furriner, anyhow. If they are a-goin' to travel with her, I wonder they don't dress her up properly, instead of 'avin' her look like a guy."

While these asides were going on, Carabet, who was carrying some smaller parcels and shawls, followed by his sister, had descended the stairs and passed through the front door, which he shut after him, so that the servants only knew, as they heard the rumble

of the carriage, that the mystery by which they had been oppressed had been lifted from the house, and with the inconsistency of human nature, or, at all events, of the feminine portion of it, they were conscious of a sense of injury; they were deprived of a certain notoriety which they had enjoyed among their acquaintances, and of a grievance which they had come to regard as a sort of perquisite connected with the place, and they felt ill-used by its removal accordingly.

The following morning, as Sebastian was dressing for breakfast, his valet put the following note into his hands:—

HONORED SIR,—Plese to mete me to-day at the ofice at the mine at 3 o'clock.

JANE SLOCUM.

This invitation was punctually responded to by Sebastian, after a consultation with Reginald. "You will go, of course," the latter had said.

"I have my doubts about doing so. Now that I know that Santalba must be a party to the whole transaction, I feel as if I was

a sort of spy upon him, and I had come to the conclusion that I would tell him all about my discovery of the imprisoned female, and ask him who she was; but, what with the Hartwrights leaving, and Florence wanting me to take her into Tongsley afterwards, I never got a chance."

"It was most fortunate you did not. Now, don't think I have not the highest opinion of Count Santalba, or that I like this spying business. You know it was I who objected to it the most strongly at first; but I implore you to be guided by me in this matter. Let us sift it a little further ourselves before we make a clean breast of it to Santalba, or expect him to make a clean breast of it to us. Had he not had some good reason for keeping it secret from you, he would have taken you into his confidence ere now. No doubt he is waiting for what he feels is the proper time; let us follow his example. Do not let either of us give or require confidences prematurely. If, as you say, and as I would fain hope, there is nothing *louche* in this whole matter, he cannot be injured by our satisfying ourselves of it without troubling him. Go, then, and meet

Jane Slocum, and let us hear what she has to say."

Sebastian's scruples thus overcome, he repaired to the rendezvous at the hour named, and listened attentively to the cook's story. From her description of the visitor, he easily identified her as Madame Masollam; but as he had met that lady at breakfast and lunch, it was clearly untrue that, as Carabet had given the servants to understand, she had herself accompanied his sister to her own country, wherever that might be. The amount of falsehood thus introduced distressed Sebastian, if it were true that Santalba was a party to it; and when he made his report to Reginald, only confirmed that gentleman's suspicions. "We must find out," he said, "from the clerk and people on duty at the station last night, whether any person answering the description of Carabet's sister went by it. Any individual so singularly attired must have attracted observation." But their inquiries proved futile; and it was evident that wherever Carabet had conveyed the unfortunate lady on the previous evening, it was not to the station.

Meantime the departure of the whole Hart-

wright family, with the exception of Florence, had considerably diminished the party at The Turrets. Moreover, since the Masollams had so suddenly entered into possession, the whole *personnel* of the establishment had been undergoing a silent and gradual change. This had been facilitated by the fact that, as we know, the Hartwrights had already discharged some of their servants before the arrival of the Masollams. Mr Masollam's own private servant had come from Paris with Madame, who also brought her own maid, while Santalba had brought his valet. Carabet had had a confidential interview with Mr Sharp, who had agreed to stay; a departing housemaid had also been replaced by one sent by the curiosity-dealer, and Mrs Hartwright had carried off her own maid with her to the Continent. Mr Sharp had been given to understand that the wing of the house which had been appropriated by the Masollams was to be attended to entirely by their own servants; and both he and the fragment of the old household which still remained, soon perceived that a sort of freemasonry subsisted between the three servants who had arrived

from Paris, which entirely cut them off from the interests common to the servants' hall. In fact, a gloom appeared to have settled over that portion of the establishment since the introduction of the three foreigners, who, although they knew a smattering of English, seemed to hold aloof from their fellow-servants, and to be on terms of intimacy with their masters and mistresses, and of secret intelligence with each other, which caused them to be regarded by the other domestics with a certain awe, not unmingled with suspicion, and, in the case of the new housemaid and a groom, with superstition.

While life below stairs presented these unusual and somewhat incongruous conditions, life above was undergoing a still more remarkable and radical change, which impressed itself, as was natural, most forcibly upon Florence, who, while she had no reason to complain of it, felt as if her old home was undergoing transformation at the touch of some enchanter's wand. It was, moreover, something so entirely different from what she expected, when she had only consented to be the guest of people so inexpressibly repugnant

to her as the Masollams, by the prospect of finding her refuge in her cousin's company.

To her surprise and delight, ever since the departure of her own family, Masollam had confined himself to his room, upon the plea of the increased frequency and severity of his nervous attacks, where his wife generally remained in attendance upon him. Even upon the rare occasions when she joined the family circle, her reticent and self-absorbed manner, coupled with the difficulty she found in expressing herself in any known tongue, isolated her from the English members of the party. She appeared to Florence, but more especially to Clareville, who watched her narrowly, to exhibit a marked coldness towards her daughter, while there was an apparent lack of sympathy between herself and Santalba, which caused him some surprise and food for contemplation.

This practical withdrawal on the part of both the Masollams from their active *rôle* as hosts, left the charge of the establishment, and its social and domestic duties, to devolve upon their daughter, who was on such terms of affectionate and confidential intimacy with

Santalba, that she seemed almost unconsciously to transfer them to him, or rather to allow him to assume the position which her father had abdicated. Clareville soon became aware that, under the influence of this extraordinary man, who was becoming a greater enigma to him than Masollam himself, a delightful sense of calm, almost amounting to languor, was stealing over him. He could scarcely realise that only a few days before he had been tossed upon the stormy billows of political life, a prey to the doubts and anxieties which were suggested to him by his sense of duty, and by what had seemed a sudden quickening of his own moral nature, of which he could render no account. He, who believed in nothing of what the world calls religion, and had often read with cynical amusement and incredulity the narratives of conversion which had from time to time been forced upon him by those who professed to be interested in his soul's welfare, had suddenly found himself stirred to the depths by a new and unknown force which would give him no peace, but which had apparently originated in the innermost depths of his own being. He

had undergone a species of moral earthquake, and a fire, the existence of which he had never suspected, had burst through the hard superficial crust of his worldly nature, and for a moment spread over the surface of his being a sense of ruin and devastation. From the first moment of his intercourse with Amina Masollam, he had become conscious of a power which she seemed to possess, to lull and calm his vexed spirit, and he attributed to this the irresistible fascination which she exercised over him; but, being a man somewhat given to the analysis of his own feelings, he refused to put the cart before the horse in her case. "I do not love her because she soothes me," he reflected, "but she soothes me because I love her." But this process of reasoning did not apply to the effect which he was conscious that the influence of the Count was exercising upon him. He could not say of that influence that it was agreeable to him, because he had been attracted to him from the first; for it was just the contrary, and his original antipathy, which had been based on prejudice, was being converted into sympathy under the potency of a spell for which he could not

account. Next to Amina herself there was no one in whose society he felt such a delightful sense of repose. He still shrank from broaching those topics upon which his own soul was most painfully exercised; but, from a thousand little signs, he felt convinced that Santalba was not ignorant of their nature, and he felt no resentment at the conviction, which gradually forced itself on his mind, that the long conversations, which he now had abundant facility for enjoying with Amina, were repeated to Santalba, and that he was an object of the deepest interest to both. He felt convinced that some close tie existed between them; but it caused him no jealousy, though all he could extract from Amina, when he asked her point-blank whether she was related to him, was—

"When we are alone I always call him uncle; but he is not really my uncle, and I love him better than anybody else in the world. That is all I can tell you now."

"What! better than your own father and mother?" exclaimed Reginald.

"I said that was all I could tell you now. Please don't ask me anything more about it."

And Reginald was silent; and, what was more surprising, felt satisfied.

It will readily be supposed that, under these circumstances, he ceased to trouble himself further about the fate of the woman who had been spirited away in the night from Carabet's. If Sebastian was satisfied, and he seemed disposed to let the matter drop, it was no business of his. And so the days glided by, and the troubled waves were stilled; and he began to wonder, as he thought of the unexpected haven of rest which Sebastian's telegram had procured for him on the morning of his despair, whether, after all, there might not be a Providence.

During all these days he made no inquiries after Masollam, preferring to ignore his existence, as the very thought of him seemed to introduce a disturbing element into his soul's tranquillity. Madame Masollam, too, had gradually given up appearing even at meals; but he was aware that both the Count and Amina spent many hours, both of the day and night, in their apartments. He now began to perceive that a certain method seemed to regulate the intercourse of all the

inmates of The Turrets. He observed that, while no restraint appeared to be put on his intercourse with Amina, she regulated its extent by a scrupulous attention to her other duties. Among these was a devotion to Florence, which much puzzled him. For several hours a-day, these two young ladies would be together. Sometimes the Count would join them; and it gradually dawned upon Clareville that never, by any accident, did he find himself alone with Miss Hartwright. As he did not especially care for her society, it was only by degrees that he became conscious of this fact. He had indeed been too much absorbed in his own affairs to pay much attention to that young lady; but now he became aware that, under the new influences to which she was being subjected, her character was undergoing a very marked change. What excited in Clareville's mind further conjecture and surprise, was her acquiescence in the reserve which Sebastian seemed to impose upon himself in his intercourse with her. Finally, he began to suspect that there was a delicate process in operation by which the cousins were to be weaned from each other;

and he felt his old suspicions arising, only to be indignantly suppressed, when he remembered that they could only prove true by proving Amina false ; for although the object of his devotion had always warned him so sternly away from delicate ground, whenever he began, however distantly, to allude to his own sentiments, and had scrupulously confined their intercourse to those topics in which they felt a common interest and sympathy, he flattered himself that she was neither unconscious of the state of his feelings towards her, nor unresponsive to them : he had nothing, however, but his own sanguine hopes to base this latter conjecture upon. Nor was there any means by which he could arrive at any positive conviction upon the subject, without disturbing the peculiar moral conditions which now reigned at The Turrets, to a degree that might involve his own immediate departure. There seemed to be a sort of potent hidden law in operation, which imposed its inward restraint with more or less force upon every member of the party. It was most marked in the Count and Miss Masollam, both of whom seemed to act, even in the

minutest details of everyday life, under some strong internal effort which never relaxed its vigilance, or permitted impulsive or spasmodic conduct of any sort,—at the same time, without impairing a spontaneity in speech and action which constituted their chief charm. Sebastian was under a similar influence of suppressed effort, but in a far lesser degree; while Reginald felt that both Florence Hartwright and himself were, so to speak, rendered involuntary and unconscious subjects of this subtle rule, to the gentle and benign control of which they felt compelled to submit, if they desired to remain members of the household.

CHAPTER XIII.

MADAME MASOLLAM'S SUSPICIONS ARE AROUSED.

THERE was a side-entrance to The Turrets besides the regular approaches from the front and rear—a sort of postern opening into a shrubbery, through which a winding path led to a door in the wall which surrounded the grounds, and which afforded those who had a private key a means of access to the house, unobserved by its occupants. It was in a passage leading to this side-entrance that Madame Masollam had appropriated a room to herself as a boudoir, which her disinclination to mix with the rest of the party rendered almost essential to her comfort. Here one morning she was seated in a flowing oriental robe, which answered the purpose of a dressing-gown. By her side was a spirit-lamp,

which had evidently been used for the preparation of the small cup of black coffee which stood on the little round table before her. Between her fingers was a cigarette, which she had just lighted, and the fumes of which she was inhaling with that dreamy languor which is induced by the first whiff of the first cigarette of the day, and which makes it superior to any other. She was gazing out of the window with an air of abstraction, watching apparently the tints of the early morning as they flushed the eastern sky, for the sun had not yet appeared above the horizon. Presently she muttered something, probably a curse, on the English climate, as with a little shiver she rose and stirred the fire, which, although it was summer, had evidently been kept in all night. Then she finished her coffee and her cigarette, and, throwing away the end of the latter with a gesture of impatience, muttered something else; and to judge from the unamiable expression of her countenance, this time her anathema had reference possibly to an individual. She was apparently expecting some one, for she rose and went to the window which looked over the path in the shrub-

bery, and returned in a moment with a sigh of relief.

"Why are you so late?" she asked snappishly, as a moment afterwards the curiosity-dealer entered the room.

"In this country, my dear, I should be considered decidedly early," replied Carabet in Armenian, which was evidently the mother tongue of both of the speakers. "What kind of a night has the Master had?"

"Bad. I have not had a wink of sleep. Things are going from bad to worse. Something must be done, and that promptly, or we shall have had all our trouble for nothing. Santalba and Amina have gone over to the enemy. I always told the Master that they would end by betraying us, but he would never believe it. You know how he is! Amina and Santalba have only got to pass an hour alone with him, and he forgets all he has arranged with me, falls into all their views, and becomes a mere tool in their hands."

"*En revanche*, Tigranuhe, you must remember that you and I have only got to pass an hour alone with him, and he forgets all he has arranged with them, falls into all

our views, and becomes a mere tool in our hands. It is strange," he continued contemplatively; "there is no man, I suppose, in the world so much and at the same time so little of an individual as he is."

"That is because there is perhaps no other man in the world so highly developed as he is, whose nervous organisation is so keenly sensitive to all the passing emotions of those with whom he has established an internal *rapport*. For the time that any individual influence is thrown violently upon him, he almost feels himself to be that individual. And as this peculiarity is more marked in him than in any one else, his own individuality becomes marked, from the very fact that it is constantly assuming, in an intense and exaggerated form, the individuality of others. Hence he is made up of contrasts, and his impulses are always extreme—and what is more extraordinary, the will by which they are animated is far more potent than it is in the persons from whom he derives his impulses. Thus it is, that many of the most powerful and influential men in the world of politics, society, or commerce, derive their strength

from their faculty of absorbing and turning to account the brain and will power of others ; but the power thus derived is more the power of influencing others, than of maintaining a fixed purpose of their own. In politics, for instance, such men seem weak and vacillating, and possess the extraordinary gift of rendering others, who are not naturally so, as weak and vacillating as themselves."

"You have become quite a profound philosopher, sister, and have developed a power of analysis I did not suspect."

"I too have a faculty of absorption, and I have lived with David Masollam for nearly forty years. Do you suppose I have gained nothing from daily contact with such a mind as his ?"

"Which from your account is made up of the minds of others."

"Only in the sense that it receives too deeply their impressions ; but in itself it is a greater mind than any of those whose impressions it receives. To know that, one has only to see what it can do in isolation. And this brings me to what I want to say to you now — something must be done to remove Santalba and Amina from his side."

"I thought Amina could be relied upon."

"Not now. She has fallen completely under the control of Santalba."

"When did you discover that he was a traitor?"

"I began to suspect it in Paris."

"Why, it was he who gave the Master a warm letter of introduction to the Hartwrights. That was not the act of a traitor."

"No; it began to develop later than that. It was in the course of our conversations in Paris, after the Master had left, that I began to perceive that he would only remain faithful to us as long as the acts of the Master squared with what he felt to be right. You remember writing to me about Sada. I consulted him about what should be done, and he presumed to criticise not only my action in the matter, but the judgment of the Master himself."

"Perhaps he thought that you had influenced it."

"And if he did, is it not my function to do so, in the relation I hold to him as his wife?"

"I see," said Carabet. "You desire that great and powerful mind to receive exclu-

sively the impressions cast upon it by yours, and to give effect to them, as he with his varied gifts alone can do, in action."

"I do not desire that as a personal wish, or from any mean and selfish motive, but from the conviction that our faculties supplement each other, and that together, if no adverse influences intervene, we make up a combination that nothing can conquer, thanks to the spiritual forces which we control."

"Or which control you," said Carabet. "Why should you be afraid of these adverse intervening influences, if you have more powerful spiritual forces at your control than they have?"

Madame Masollam looked at him suspiciously. "I don't quite like the tone of that remark, brother," she said.

"Oh, I am all with you," he exclaimed hurriedly, and with a shade of alarm in his voice. "You need never be afraid of my turning traitor, or having an opinion of my own, apart from you and the Master. I am, as you know, your slave in life and death. I only wanted to understand the nature of the influences with which we have to fight.

They must be powerful, to cause you so much anxiety."

"They are terrific: because they are intrenching themselves in the only two natures which are a danger to us, because they have been trained and prepared to fight with us, that is why I call them traitors."

"In what particular direction is their treachery developing itself now?"

"First, Sada's removal from your house was done at Santalba's desire. It was at his instigation that the Master paid her that midnight visit, and then directed me to go and make arrangements for her removal, and I was unable to induce him to reverse his decision. It is the first time such a thing has ever happened," she added bitterly. "Secondly, neither Amina nor Santalba is obeying instructions. Amina is instructed to use all her influence with Florence, to wean her from her attachment to Sebastian; instead of that, she is rendering the girl more attractive to him, by developing her moral and intellectual faculties, while Santalba seems to be aiding and abetting her. Her duties are towards Sebastian, not Florence. She seems

now to have decided to obey Santalba instead of the Master. All last night he was suffering physical agonies from her disobedience."

"Has she been spoken to about it?"

"Not yet. The Master wished you to be present. I will tell him you are here,"—and Madame Masollam left the room. In a few moments she returned, saying, "I am going to bring Amina. The Master says he wishes you to go to him at once."

When Carabet entered, Masollam, or "the Master," as he was generally called by those immediately connected with him, was still in bed; his face was haggard, and bore traces of recent suffering. "You have heard what the business of the morning is from Tigranuhe," he said in a low voice. Replying softly in the affirmative, Carabet sat down by the bedside. "I want you to fix your will as strongly as possible in support of mine, while I am talking to her," he next said — and Carabet signified a silent assent. Masollam then closed his eyes, and nothing more was said; even when Madame Masollam entered with her daughter, the old man maintained his motionless attitude, apparently ignoring

their presence. This silence continued for at least a quarter of an hour, none venturing to move, much less to break it by words.

At last Masollam exclaimed with a groan, "I cannot bear the pain of this. Amina, you are killing me."

The girl lifted her trembling eyelids. "You know I never want to give you pain, father," she said; "what can I do to relieve you?"

"The only sure way would be to leave the house. Your presence in it, now that you have proved unfaithful, is a cause of constant suffering to me."

"Would it not do as well if Santalba were to leave it?" suggested Madame Masollam.

"Better; but he might not go, and I can not risk his refusal."

"But I am not conscious of having been unfaithful; if you will tell me what I have done, I may remedy it, dear father," and Amina leant forward and touched his hand. He snatched it away as though stung by a scorpion. An expression of intense distress flushed Amina's countenance at this action. "I was here with Uncle Santalba last night,

and you did not seem to feel anything wrong about either of us then," she went on.

"I need not explain to you, child, who have seen so many of them, how suddenly and unexpectedly these revelations come upon me. You had no sooner left, than I perceived the cause of the dumb pain I have been suffering from for the last three days, and could not account for."

"But mother spoke to you about it first. Was it not she who said that your suffering was caused by us?" and as she spoke she saw something in the expression of her father's face, which made her turn her flashing eye upon her mother.

"Suppose it was, child—what then?" and Madame Masollam fiercely met her daughter's gaze as she spoke. Amina's eyes dropped.

"Where do you want me to go, father?" she asked meekly.

"I don't want you to go," he sighed, "if I could only see some other way out of it."

"As her Uncle Carabet seems more to be relied upon than her Uncle Santalba, why should she not go to him?" again suggested Madame.

Masollam made no answer, and again closed his eyes.

"There are many reasons why that would not do," he said at length. "Do you think, child, I can trust you, if I try you again?" he added, after another pause.

"I think so, father; I was not willingly unfaithful."

"No; your infidelity was too subtle for you to be externally conscious of it. Now I think I can take your hand," and as though bracing himself for an effort, he held out his own. Amina placed hers in it.

"I feel Santalba's hand," he murmured, "and I feel Clareville's, and I even feel something of that young Hartwright woman. How is it, Amina, that you cannot hold yourself closed to the invasion of every personality you come near? You know I warned you against Clareville. I did not think," he added, with a heavy sigh, "that I should ever have to warn you against Santalba."

"Don't you think you had better send for him now, and explain that he is causing you pain? I am sure he is as unconscious of any willing infidelity to his trust as I am."

"Had that been so, I would have sent for him, as I have sent for you. No ; you must brace yourself to the effort, he must know nothing of what has passed. Be affectionate to him as ever, and from time to time, I suppose, I shall have to see him ; but close up every avenue of sympathy, both to him and to Clareville. Your manner to the latter must change entirely—to him be cold and reserved ; to Sebastian, with whom we really have to do, for we should not be here but for him, be cordial and affectionate, he must be won, and though you knew this, acting I suppose under Santalba's influence, you have neglected him, and devoted yourself to those who do not need your devotion. I shall soon know," he added, in a warning voice, "whether the internal conditions have changed, and whether you have been able to repair the grievous error into which you have fallen. If you cannot, you may prepare in three days to return with Carabet to Damascus. I wished for your presence," added Masollam, turning to the latter, "that you might know why a journey was possibly in store for you, and be ready for it." And he lifted his hand with a gesture which

indicated that the business of the morning, so far as he was concerned, was at an end.

Amina, who, by a powerful effort of will, had deprived herself during the interview of that consolation to which she, in common with the rest of her sex, usually resort under trying circumstances, gave vent to her feelings in sobs upon her pillow, in the privacy of her own room. While Madame Masollam, in the privacy of hers, remarked to her brother with the air of one who has scored a victory, "She will never be able to hold out. It will be very inconvenient, no doubt, but you may make up your mind, my dear brother, for a journey to the Pearl City of the East."

CHAPTER XIV.

A LITTLE TELEPATHY.

Calms are proverbially treacherous, and for some days previous to the interview which we have described in the last chapter, Clareville had been haunted by a dumb sort of presentiment that there was a storm brewing. He could give no reason to himself for this feeling of uneasiness, and attributed it to that vague instinct of mistrust of which we are sometimes conscious, when events run too smoothly to seem altogether natural, and our happiness is too complete and too unexpected, to have in it an element of permanence. He had written to his mother immediately on the change of plan, to explain why the proposed visit of Sebastian and Miss Hartwright was indefinitely postponed, and to account for his own

absence and seclusion in such stirring times; and he had spent some part of the night which preceded the events described in the last chapter in writing a letter to his father, announcing his intention to withdraw from public life; and he added that his friend Sebastian Hartwright had arrived at the same determination, and had induced him to join in certain investigations in which they were both interested, and which would necessitate, for a time at all events, a certain degree of retirement from the spheres of their former activity. There was no *assertio falsi* in this statement, though there was a very distinct *suppressio veri*. He said nothing in these letters of the Masollam family, or of Count Santalba; much less that, as the result of many long conversations with Amina, he had decided to enter upon a course of moral and physical experiment, with the view of testing in his own person the truth of certain conclusions in regard to the nature and extent of the human faculty, and the laws governing the vital forces which control it, at which she, in common with Santalba—who, however, had so far studiously avoided discussing these sub-

jects with Reginald—seemed to have arrived. It is possible that he was influenced in this decision as much by his love for Amina as by his love for truth, for our highest motives in life are seldom unmixed; and it is, moreover, certain that he was not indifferent to the fact that his most intimate friend would be engaged in the same pursuit.

When he looked back at the extraordinary change which a few weeks had worked upon all his views of life, he could hardly believe that he was the same man who was so lately spinning round in the social and political whirlpool, making splash enough as he did so, to raise the hopes of his friends, and to gratify his own vanity. He marvelled much at the combination of circumstances which had forced him not only to withdraw from it, but to enter upon a course of research which, of all others, had been most anti-pathetic to him. It had sufficed for the silent watches of one night to tear away what he could only describe to himself as a sort of barrier between an outer and an inner conscience, of the very existence of which he had been hitherto unaware. His old conscience

had, so to speak, disappeared. It had been a good workaday sort of conscience — the average conscience of an English gentleman and a man of honour; a conscience that would scorn a base action according to the standard recognised in society of what baseness is; a conscience very particular indeed about money, especially where gambling debts were concerned — not perhaps quite so particular about tradesmen, but even they had not much to complain of; a conscience also particular about women, especially those whose husbands were his own personal friends; a conscience that forbade him under any possible circumstances to tell a lie, except where a woman was concerned — and which was, above all things, scrupulous that its own dictates should not be violated. Altogether, it had a very fair glimmering light of its own, one that Clareville had been able to see his way very well by, for a matter of nearly thirty years; and his neighbours had recognised it as one quite as highly quickened as theirs, so that he was known among them as an honourable high-going fellow; but its lamp had been eclipsed in a night by the effulgence of a moral ray that had

shot across his being, revealing to him a code written as though in letters of fire, and which seemed imperatively to demand of him the sacrifice of himself, with all his personal aims and ambitions, at the shrine of his fellow-men. He who could believe neither in God nor in immortality, saw by the light of this new revelation that he had practically carried his scepticism so far as to disbelieve even in humanity, and the humiliation of this discovery prostrated and appalled him ; but the agony of it was not destined to endure without alleviation. The pain of the blow that felled was more than compensated for by the tenderness of the arm that uplifted. There is in the joy of illumination which attends a divine revelation, ample reward for the momentary blindness produced by its first flash upon the moral eyesight. Thus it was that as Reginald, at first stunned and blinded, awoke, as it were, to new moral consciousness, he felt the peace of the new religion which had burst upon him flood his soul, and, under the impulse of it, dedicated himself to the service to which he felt that it had called him. The interests of self, of family, of party, even of country, which

he had till now thought supreme, sank into insignificance. The cry of the universe for help seemed to ring in his ears; but as he listened to it, the sense of his own impotence became so overwhelming that the ray of hope and of joy went out, and he fell into a deep sleep, with the sense of despair oppressing him like a nightmare—and all he knew when he awoke was that his decision had been irrevocably taken, and that, even if it was all a dream, it was one which conveyed a truth, the spell of which was destined to change the whole current of his life. He was conscious of more than this. He remembered that at the moment when in his sleep his despair seemed most acute, an impression had been conveyed to his mind that he would not be left to grope in vain for the method of putting his resolution into practice, but that he would find a way open to him; and as he thus dreamt, a bright female figure seemed to flash out of the gloom, lighting it for a moment with a supernatural radiance, and as suddenly disappearing, and he thought he recognised in it the fair unknown whom he had met in the Ladies' Gallery of the House of Commons. He was

pondering over this when he received Sebastian's telegram and decided to accept the invitation it contained; and now, reviewing the events which had since occurred, he could recognise a method in the guidance which he was following; for in his love for Amina, and her sympathy with his new aspirations, he perceived that her influence was probably the only one which could have induced him to experimentalise in the effort to realise them, in a direction which was altogether opposed to his inclination. His own crude notion as to the best way to give effect to his new humanitarian impulses, had been to bury himself in the slums of London, and go to work among its outcasts; but she proposed something very different, and suggested processes of self-preparation for the work to which he felt himself called, so foreign to all his instincts, and so violently antagonistic to his prejudices, that it needed all his love for her, and all the influence of Sebastian, and the assurances of his friend that he too had determined actively to participate in the same effort, to reconcile him to this new departure.

"Remember," he said to Sebastian, whom

he met in the garden in the early morning after he had arrived at this decision, "I go into this to satisfy Amina and you"—he had taken to speaking of her as Amina now; "but I positively decline to be dragged into any kind of mysticism. She and you say we all need some kind of moral preparation to be as useful as we should be. Well, I am quite ready to admit that; God knows there is plenty of moral repair needed in this hulk, which is inhabited by what I suppose you would call my soul."

"I am not particular as to terms," said Sebastian. "I am quite willing to admit that you have not got a soul, if you are ready to go to work for the purpose of making moral repairs upon your body."

"Oh, I am willing to call the moral part of my body my soul, provided you don't separate it from the other part and make it immortal!"

"Well, supposing, to avoid such clumsy definitions as a moral part and a physical part, we call the whole thing—you will admit you are a 'thing'?—your 'organism,' that will include your whole being—because, you know,

you are a 'being'—and postpone the question of its immortality indefinitely?"

"Yes," said Reginald, laughing, "I will grant you all that. I must say you are not exacting when argument is concerned. And when are we to begin our experiments?"

"That will depend upon Santalba. You have remarked how carefully he has avoided talking to you on these subjects."

"Yes; and it has rather surprised me, as I have led up to them several times."

"He was waiting for your decision; there was no use in his talking to you till you had decided."

"But he might have helped me to decide."

"He did not think it right to do so; and you see he was correct, for you have decided without him. He never wastes his ammunition."

"Well, I will try and receive the first broadside, whenever he thinks fit to pour it into me, with as good a grace as possible. By the way," and Reginald hesitated for a moment, flushing slightly as he continued, "you have not seen Miss Masollam in the garden anywhere this morning, have you?"

"Miss Masollam! No; what should bring her out at this early hour?"

"What can have brought you out at this early hour? I might as well ask," said Reginald.

"Suppose I put the same question to you, old man. I will tell you exactly why I am strolling about the garden at seven A.M., if you will tell me why you are."

Reginald paused for some time before he answered. "Agreed," he said at length.

"Well, I came out simply because Santalba told me last night to meet him here this morning at seven."

"Did he promise that he would be here?"

"No; he never promises anything if he can avoid it. He only told me to be here on the chance. He seemed to have something weighing on his mind last night. 'It is very likely I may need you to-morrow about something important,' he said; 'but I may be wrong; at any rate it will be best for you to be up and out as early as possible.' That is all that I know about it. He did not make it a matter of confidence, or I should not have repeated it. Now tell me your reasons."

"I don't mind telling you, because it only shows what tricks our imagination can play, and it compromises nobody. I got up because I distinctly heard Amina calling me from the garden. That is my window," and he pointed to one immediately above them. "The tones were so distinctly hers, and in such deep distress, that I jumped up and looked out of the window, but I could see no one. I should have gone back to bed again, but I was so positively certain of her voice that I dressed and came down at once. Even still, I think, she must be in some other part of the garden; but I have been to her favourite seat and everywhere I could think of."

"Have you been to the back shrubbery?"

"No, she never goes there; but we may as well look."

"What did she say?" asked Sebastian.

"Only 'Reginald,' 'Reginald.' The first time I did not hear it so distinctly, for it seemed to wake me; but the second time it seemed almost like a cry of distress coming from the garden, and was unmistakable, for I was broad awake at the time. I must have

eaten something that disagreed with me last night."

"That might account for your dreaming you heard it, but not for your actually hearing it, as you say you did, when you were awake."

"It may be with one's ears as with one's eyes," answered Reginald. "If you look at something very hard, and then shut your eyes, the image remains for a few seconds stamped on the retina; so if you hear something in a dream, the sound may repeat itself on the tympanum after you are awake."

"My dear Reginald, that won't do—too thin. There is another far better way of accounting for it, and it ought to suit you, because it's scientific."

"Which is that?" asked Reginald.

"My poor friend," and Sebastian tapped his forehead significantly, "you are mad—clearly mad. That is the scientific explanation. The victim of hallucination. Never breathe a word of this to any one but me. I often hear voices like that, but then I am a confirmed lunatic. I was fool enough to mention it to several of my friends, and I don't feel that my freedom is worth a

day's purchase. Hark! there is a step on the path through the shrubbery. Come this way, and we will reach the door in the garden wall, and see if it is Miss Masollam; if it really was her voice you heard, you will have regained your sanity."

"I don't feel sure of that," grimly muttered Reginald to himself, as he bethought him that in the eyes of his family and friends his passion for the fair Oriental would be the greatest evidence of his insanity which he could afford.

He was interrupted in his meditations by a surprised whistle from his friend, as they both stopped suddenly at a point where they were screened by some bushes, and observed a man draw a key from his pocket, and turn it in the lock, and let himself out. "Carabet, by Jove! and with a pass-key, too. He seems to have been spending the night here. There is mischief brewing, depend upon it. This is what Santalba was feeling. I must hurry back; he may be looking for me." And dropping his friend's arm, Sebastian quickly disappeared.

"It is very strange," murmured Reginald, "the way I seem to be beginning to feel things

before they happen. For days I have been conscious that this calm could not last, and that a crisis was impending; and now that it is almost upon me, I can only vaguely make out that it is a conflict of forces which affects my own peace of mind and equilibrium in a manner hitherto unknown to me. Pah! it is too absurd. I am getting as fanciful and superstitious as a servant-girl. And yet if Amina should be in distress; and if there is some conspiracy against her; and this Carabet is the tool to be employed,—the sharp pain I felt the moment I saw him, may mean something."

And Reginald slowly strolled round to the other side of the house, where he had first met Sebastian, who, as he now saw, had been joined by Santalba, with whom he seemed deeply engaged in conversation. On seeing him, the Count beckoned to him to approach.

"Sebastian tells me," he said, laying his hand affectionately on his arm, "that you have made up your mind to devote your life and energies and your means to the cause to which we have dedicated ours."

"I told Miss Masollam, after a long con-

versation which I had with her last night," replied Reginald, "that I would carefully consider the subject, and give her a definite answer this morning. I have considered it, and I have so far decided, that I have written to my father to prepare him for my withdrawal from the worldly career which I had proposed to follow; but this by no means implies that I commit myself to any adhesion to views, or belief in theories, the truth of which can only be tested by experiments. I at present believe in nothing beyond the bare fact that I have a duty to my fellow-creatures which must override all personal considerations, and which may possibly involve the sacrifice of preconceived opinions, and even of cherished affections. Hitherto I have nursed myself in the comfortable cradle of agnosticism, in the illusion, as I feel it may possibly be now, that I had not the faculty of mind which should enable me to discover truth, nor the energies of will which should stimulate me to do good. I have now decided to devote my life to the search of the highest truth I can attain, and to the performance of the greatest good in my power. That is

practically all that my decision amounts to. I know nothing yet of the processes to be followed for the higher development of my faculties; but I am willing to test those which Miss Masollam assures me have proved satisfactory, both to her and to yourself, and of which it seems that my friend Sebastian here is also ready and willing to make trial, reserving to myself always the right, if they in any way violate my moral consciousness, to withdraw from them."

"I do not think that you will ever have occasion to regret your decision, even if it is wrong; for if a man's motives be as pure and as noble as those by which you are animated, truth can be revealed to him by means of the very mistakes which he makes in the search after it; provided always he has no other desire but to spend and be spent for his fellow-creatures. We all arrive at truth in different ways: here is Sebastian, who first plunged in search of it into the vortex of spiritualism, and is only just now recovering from a severe attack of esoteric Buddhism. Had he been actuated by no higher motives than vulgar curiosity, the love of the marvel-

lous, or the pursuit of a fashionable craze, he would have suffered injury,—as it is, he has received no harm. But you must be prepared for severe and unexpected tests."

"I have already said that I am ready for them, provided they do not require of me anything of which my conscience disapproves."

"I am here now," said the Count with a grave earnestness of manner, "to offer you the first one; and in doing so, I think it right to remind you—and I am sure when you have heard it, that you will agree with me—that if you find it to be one which it is impossible for you to accept, your visit here cannot be further prolonged."

Clareville winced. "This is driving me rather unfairly into a corner," he said to himself; "however, in for a penny, in for a pound."

"I am all attention," he replied, turning to the Count.

"Take this paper, then, which Mr Masollam has requested me to hand you, and kindly read it with attention."

Reginald sat down on a garden-seat and slowly perused the document, while Santalba paced the gravel walk in front of him. It was

in Amina's handwriting, and purported to be dictated to her by her father. It contained a minute analysis, a sort of moral diagnosis of the reader's own character; entering into details which Reginald felt that it was impossible for any one to know but himself, and tracing the moral processes by which he had been influenced from his youth to the present date, with an accuracy and knowledge which utterly confounded Clareville. He knew that he had allowed Amina to "draw" him as he had never been "drawn" before. He had revealed to her many of the secrets of his heart, and had frankly discussed the life problems by which his conscience had been exercised; but this could not account for the inspiration which had dictated in these pages incidents in his life, and the moral consequences that followed, which affected himself alone, and which were of the nature of inner experiences of which he had never spoken to living soul.

"Do you accept that as true?" asked Santalba, seeing that he had finished.

"I should be untrue myself if I did otherwise," answered Reginald.

"That being so, and in the presence of your

admission that he who dictated it has judged you accurately, I have to propose to you as the test which you desire of your own sincerity of motive, that you submit yourself, of course under the reservation you have just mentioned, to the absolute guidance and direction of Mr and Madame Masollam."

Clareville felt the blood leave his cheeks. The blow came from so unexpected a quarter that he almost staggered under it. It was as though some one had struck him from behind. He looked at Sebastian, and his friend's pale countenance was not reassuring. Amina's despairing cry, Carabet's furtive exit, which he had just witnessed, the mystery of the concealed woman, his old suspicions of the conspiracy, which seemed to afford the only clue to the Masollams' presence in the house at all—all rushed upon his mind with overwhelming force. His first instinct was to plead, as a valid reason for refusing this test, the reservation he had just made, and yet there was no moral ground for refusing it. The fact that he felt a violent antipathy to, and suspicion of, Masollam, and the most intense repulsion towards his wife, was no reason why he should

not place himself under their direction and guidance, if by so doing he could advance the ends he had in view. He had no proof whatever that Masollam had ever been guilty of any dishonourable action; the mysterious female might now be free, and might from the first have been a prisoner with her own consent. Amina's cry proved nothing, nor did the fact that Carabet was in the habit of visiting the house with his own pass-key. After all, the Masollams were Amina's parents, and must have instilled into her those noble sentiments which had so strongly attracted him to her. The more he analysed his feelings, the more he felt that they were based upon prejudice. Then he became conscious of a singular conflict in his mind; battling with his hatred for the Masollams — for the sentiment he entertained towards them can be described by no milder term — he felt an uncontrollable impulse to obey Santalba. Though the test was put to him as one which he was free to accept or reject, his liberty of choice seemed unduly interfered with by the collateral consideration that practically its rejection implied separation

from Amina, and, as he fondly believed, would cause her disappointment and distress; while its acceptance would unite his aims and efforts to hers, and would in fact be the first link in a chain by which they might be bound, possibly for life, in the closest bonds of sympathy, of common interests, and of mutual co-operation. It flashed upon him that she knew of Santalba's intention to present this test to him now, and that the cry of distress he had heard, might be some inner mysterious appeal from her soul to his not to reject it. At first the fact that the singular document he had read was in Amina's handwriting had given him a strange shock. The idea that he had been morally dissected for her benefit was inexpressibly painful to him, —all the more so, as he felt that marvellous though the analysis was, its accuracy must still be largely due to the insight he had allowed her to have into his character. By degrees this reflection, instead of separating them, seemed to be drawing them together. A new tie had been established between them; she knew him better than his own mother did now, and was therefore, in one sense, closer to

him than any living woman. Should he refuse the test, not only would it separate him from her, but it would fairly give rise to the suspicion, both in her mind and in Santalba's, that he was animated by a petty motive of wounded vanity. As he thought thus, he became strangely overpowered by a conviction that the bare idea of rejecting the test now offered to him, constituted an infidelity to his own highest aspirations, and to the sentiments to which he had so recently given utterance, and would give the lie to his own perfect sincerity of purpose. He was conscious, while these conflicting emotions were raging within him, that the mild eyes of Santalba were fixed upon him, and he imagined, as he caught his glance, that he detected in it a shade of anxiety. "I believe he and Amina are honest, at any rate," he said to himself, "so here goes. I won't refuse my first fence; it will be time enough to bolt off the course if these infernal Masollams expect me to be a party to any of their conspiracies, or do anything I don't think right." Then turning to the Count,—"It is a nasty pill to begin with," he observed, "and I hope

there will not be many more like it; but you may consider it swallowed."

Santalba drew a long sigh, as though of relief.

"And you, my boy," he said, turning to Sebastian.

"Oh, I accept."

"Then I think the business of the morning is settled—it must be getting near breakfast-time. There is Miss Hartwright taking a stroll, and I think she would like you to join her, Sebastian. You can tell her what you think best. Amina feels much encouraged about Florence."

And the Count and Sebastian moved off in opposite directions, leaving Clareville a prey to conflicting and distinctly painful emotions.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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